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The New Criterion

February 1989

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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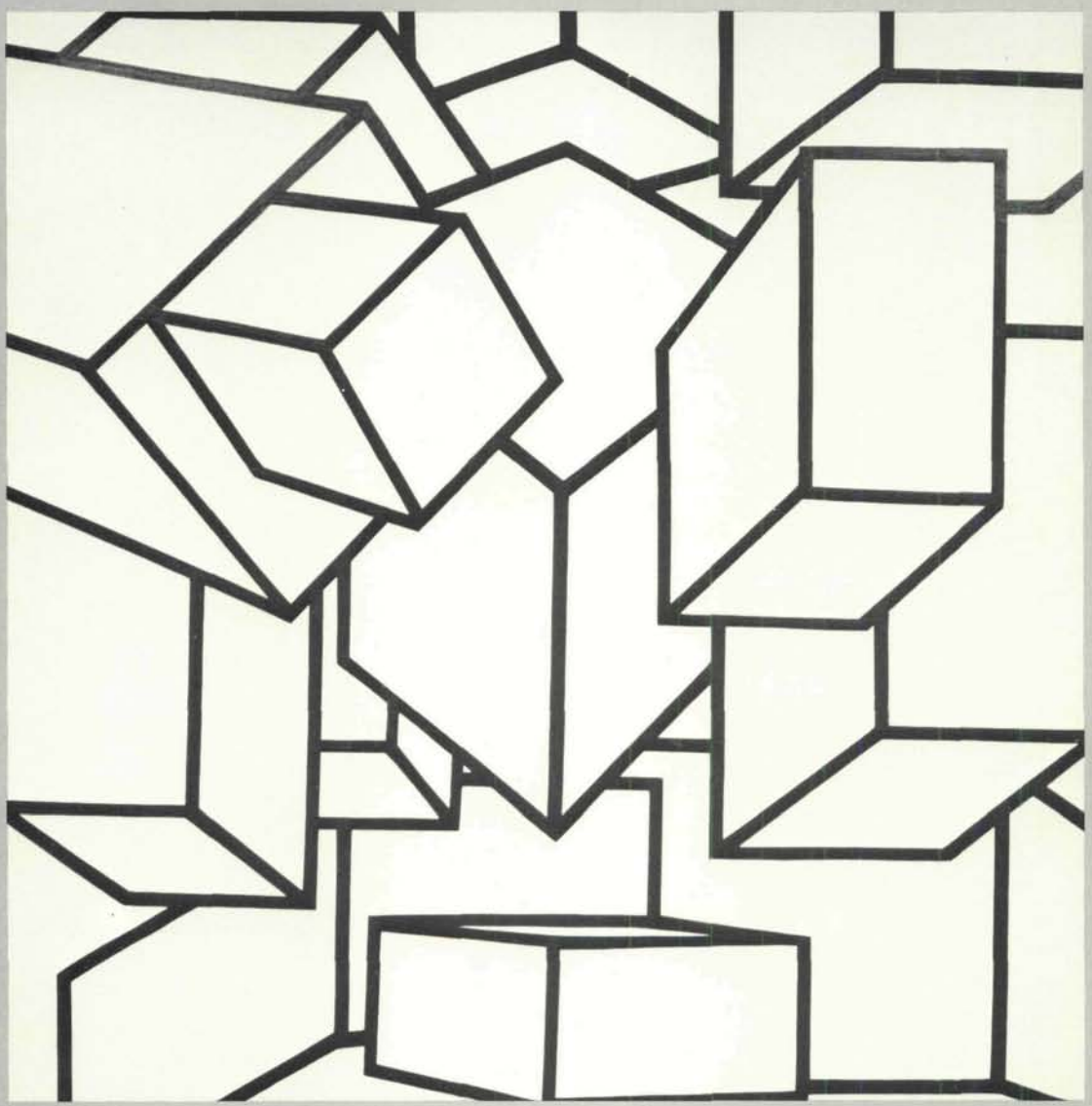

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Sandra McPherson's latest book is *Streamers* (Ecco, 1988).

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Leslie Norris's twelfth book of poetry, *Sequences,* was published last year by Gibbs Smith.

Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End,* has been published by North Point Press.

Robert Phillips's most recent collection is *Personal Accounts: New and Selected Poems, 1966-86.*

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Studying the arts and the humanities: what can be done?

by Hilton Kramer

For those who have followed the problem with the attention it demands, both the nature and the scale of the crisis that has overtaken the study of the arts and the humanities in our universities have now been made vividly and painfully manifest. The subject has become a matter of (albeit muddled) debate in the media, it has won the attention of government agencies, it has produced some best-selling books, and—it is my impression, anyway—it has caused a more acute feeling of anxiety, at times amounting to panic, among the educated parents of high school- and college-age students than anything that has occurred in American life since the Vietnam war. (It is this widespread feeling of panic among educated parents that accounts, I believe, for the huge sales of such books as *The Closing of the American Mind* and *Cultural Literacy*.) Not even the fears generated by the onset of the sexual revolution of the Sixties had quite this effect on American middle-class society, for—correctly or not—the hazards of sexual liberation were generally not seen to constitute an impediment to either a successful career or a good life. Just the contrary, in fact—except, of course, among the diehards who still refused to give up the idea that morals should somehow play a crucial role in such matters. On the campus itself, this crisis over what is being taught in the name of the arts and the humanities has likewise caused a greater degree of demoralization and conflict among faculty members than any development since the Vietnam war, and among gifted students it has probably already resulted in a greater number of defections from the professional study of the arts and the humanities than the war itself caused. This issue is such that it has now raised a fundamental question as to whether the universities in this country will have any but a negative, disabling, and destructive role to play in the formation of the intellectual life—and hence the social character—of the generation now entering higher education.

In the report *Humanities in America* recently issued by Lynne V. Cheney, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the second Reagan administration, Professor Walter Jackson Bate of Harvard University is quoted as having declared in 1982 that the humanities were then, in his view, "plunging into their worst state of crisis since the modern university was formed a century ago."[1] Yet the situation is far worse today—and not least, by the way, at Harvard—than it was seven years ago, and going downhill at an ever increasing rate of speed. One important sign of this rapid deterioration can be seen in the extent to which

1 This article is based on a lecture at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York in a program, jointly sponsored by *The New Criterion*, called "The Humanities and Education Today: A New Barbarism?" The other speaker of the evening was Lynne V. Cheney, Chairman of the NEH.

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the study of the arts and the humanities is no longer entirely distinguishable from the reign of the social sciences, which nowadays bear little, if any, relation to the spirit of scientific inquiry and are more than ever an openly acknowledged program of political indoctrination. Among the many current attacks on the arts and the humanities in the American academy, none in fact is more conspicuous or successful than the assault that has been mounted on these fields—which are so precious to us for what they are in themselves and so central in transmitting from one generation to another the very idea of what our civilization is—from this quarter. That the social sciences have met with so little resistance in their imperious drive to annex the arts and the humanities to their own domain is now, more often than not, the most distinguishing feature of entire disciplines—literary study, art history, history itself—that were formerly so fiercely jealous of their intellectual autonomy and so rigorous in defending it.

So advanced and widespread is this surrender of the arts and the humanities to the social sciences—and to the radical political agenda of the social sciences—that we now have reason, I believe, to look upon the social sciences as a kind of academic Gulag to which, on one campus after another and in one learned journal after another, the arts and the humanities have been sent for what, in other parts of the world, it is customary to describe as "re-education" or "rehabilitation"—in other words, brainwashing. There are, to be sure, certain pockets of resistance to this runaway trend, but by and large what we are seeing in the academy in America is a wholesale capitulation to an idea and an ideology that has as its goal the complete destruction of the arts and the humanities as independent and autonomous fields of study which derive their standards, their methods, and their vision from the artistic and humanistic achievements that called these intellectual disciplines into existence in the first place.

It is not my purpose here, however, to provide another detailed description of the melancholy fate that has befallen the arts and the humanities in academic life and in the larger cultural and intellectual world outside the academy. Most of us have already heard enough and read enough about the horrors that are being visited upon these critical and scholarly disciplines as a matter of academic routine, and every day the newspapers and magazines bring fresh news from the front—as do, indeed, the phone calls from anguished friends and colleagues who cry out to us for help in warding off the still greater horrors that they see in store for them. The courses that now substitute Hollywood movies for classic texts, that scrap the study of Western civilization for a whole variety of politicized ethnic, racial, and gender studies—that systematically liquidate the very concept of art and scholarship in favor of a so-called materialist, which is to say economic and political, analysis of the conditions of their production—news of these developments reaches us every day in accelerating numbers, and all too often we follow these news reports with the same kind of sinking feeling, and feelings of helplessness, that we experience in following the news of devastating hurricanes and volcanic eruptions. We know very well what kind of destruction follows in the wake of these disasters, whether they occur at celebrated institutions like Harvard and Yale and Princeton and Columbia and Stanford and Duke or at many other less celebrated schools where the corpses of the defeated are buried without notice or regret.

Describing these ghastly developments is important, for with any plague that threatens to destroy something vital to our existence our first obligation is to gather as much intelligence about it as we can and issue information about the means of surviving it. But speaking for myself, anyway, and for some of my colleagues both at *The New Criterion* and elsewhere—for we are not *entirely* alone in this struggle—I think the time has come to move the discussion to another stage—the stage at which we must come to grips with the question of what can be done to reverse this spirit-destroying

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menace to the life of the mind itself—to the life of the mind as we in the West have traditionally understood it.

What, then, can be done?

I want to try to answer this question—or at least suggest the direction in which the answers are, as I think, to be found—by dividing the question into two parts: into what must, for obvious reasons, be called *politics*, and what, for reasons that might not be so obvious or agreeable to everyone, must in my view be called *art*.

At least as a strategy for intellectual combat, if not in other respects, the easier part of the question to discuss is politics. We all know—and certainly our enemies know—that the assault on the study of the arts and the humanities we are discussing is, above all, a political assault—an attempt on the part of the radical Left first to discredit and then to do away with what in our most exalted artistic and humanistic traditions may be seen to offer resistance, either directly or by implication, to the total politicization of culture and life. We know the assault is at bottom political, no matter under what other temporary banners the assault may at times be mounted and regardless of what unexceptionable virtues it may at times be mounted in the name of.

We know it is political, and if we have any sense of what is involved in the assault itself, we will also know that political means must be found to struggle against the goals that our enemies wish to see achieved. No one, I think, can accuse me of entering into the discussion of this question without a keen appreciation of its political dimension. My own enemies—whose attacks upon me, by the way, I cherish, if only because they confirm my conviction that I am heading in the right direction—have been vocal in underscoring my political approach to the question, and on this matter, anyway, they have not always been wrong. Yet I want to say here that I do *not* believe, and have never believed, that the real solution to the crisis we are facing, which, I repeat, *is* a political crisis, is to be found in politics alone, or even perhaps in politics primarily. The defense of what I wish to call *art*—a word I shall use here to represent what it is that the creators of high culture in every field achieve in all of the arts and humanities—the defense of what I am calling art can never be successful on any terms worth fighting for if it is completely and irreversibly subordinated to politics, even our own politics.

Art, as I wish to understand it—and this includes scholarship, too—must be defended and pursued and relished not for any political program it might be thought to serve but for what it *is*, in and of itself, as a mode of knowledge, as a source of spiritual and intellectual enlightenment, as a special form of pleasure and moral elevation, and as a spur to the highest reaches of human aspiration. Art must be savored and preserved and transmitted as the very medium in which our civilization either lives and prospers—prospers intellectually and spiritually—or withers and dies. To subordinate art to politics—even, as I say, to *our* politics—is not only to diminish its power to shape our civilization at its highest levels of aspiration but to condemn it to a role that amounts to little more than social engineering.

In the situation that we are facing today in the study of the arts and the humanities, the temptation to emulate our enemies in subordinating art to politics will inevitably be great, because such a course offers—or at least gives us the illusion of offering—the shortest route to short-term victories. But if it is our civilization that we believe to be at stake in this struggle, then this temptation to grasp at whatever short-term victories might be achieved must be resisted in favor of the longer-term objectives. Otherwise, I believe we shall merely find ourselves collaborating with our enemies on the destruction of the very thing we have set out to defend and preserve. Art must be defended and pursued and preserved for what it is rather than as a political instrument in the service of some other cause. The defense and advancement of art cannot be deferred to some hypothetical future when, as we

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might prefer to believe, the struggle will be less arduous and the conditions more propitious. The defense of art must not, in other words, be looked upon as a luxury of civilization—to be indulged in and supported when all else is serene and unchallenged—but as the very essence of our civilization.

If we approach the defense of art from this perspective, then the really compelling question at the moment is: How do we begin to do it? And in dealing with this very large question, we must be prepared to argue even with our friends, for it is my impression that there is no unanimity of outlook on this issue. The most we can hope for is that something useful and effective will emerge from an effort at argument and dialogue.

I want, in any case, to direct my own suggestions to the two fields I know best—the study of the arts and the humanities in college and university education; and the field of criticism outside the colleges and universities. About the first, the study of the arts and the humanities in the colleges and universities, I want to begin with a modest but radical practical proposal: that we get the movies out of the liberal arts classroom. We've simply got to throw them out. There is no good reason for the movies to be there, and there is every reason to get rid of them. They not only take up too much time, but the very process of according them serious attention sullies the pedagogical goals they are ostensibly employed to serve. The students are in class to read, write, learn, and think, and the movies are an impediment to that process. Students are going to go to the movies anyway, and to bring them into the classroom—either as objects of study or as aids to study—is to blur and destroy precisely the kind of distinction—the distinction between high culture and popular culture—that it is now one of the functions of a sound liberal education to give our students.

Following from this, I believe that all forms of popular culture should be banned from courses in the arts and the humanities. Typically today students arrive on college campuses already besotted with the trash of popular culture, and it must now be one of the goals of a sound liberal education to wean them away from it—or, if that is asking too much (I don't think it is, but if that really is too much) then we can at least hope to educate our students to perceive what the differences are between high culture and the trash that impinges on so much of their leisure time. The study of popular culture may legitimately belong to the realm of the social sciences—that, at least, can be argued—but it has no legitimate place in the arts and the humanities. This field of study—the study of popular culture—is a curse we have inherited from Marxist-oriented sociology, where it began, anyway, as a means of studying evidence of the way capitalist society corrupted its members. The Marxists might not even be wrong about that—that is not the question I wish to pursue at the moment. But for the arts and the humanities to surrender to this concept—a social-science concept—of our civilization is a guarantee of failure for what it is the study of the arts and the humanities ought to give our students.

It follows from this, moreover, that we must make an effort—though it is uphill work to do so—to rescue the study of the arts and the humanities from the baleful influence that the social sciences themselves continue to wield with such devastating results. This effort to draw the line between high culture and the social sciences will be, if anything, even more difficult to achieve than any attempt to expel the movies and other forms of popular culture from liberal education. For many critics that we admire, from Taine and Arnold in the nineteenth century to Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling in ours, have done important work—work that is central to our understanding of modern culture—by introducing the ideas drawn from the social sciences into literary study. We have all learned much from them—I certainly have—and they often offer us a kind of intelligence, about life, if not always about literature, we would not want to do without. Yet I think we now stand

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in such a radically different relation to our artistic and humanistic traditions than these critics did—our students, and probably much of our faculty, too, if the truth be told, are now so distant from and so ignorant of the central artistic and humanistic works that constitute those traditions—that I believe we must revise our ideas about the place to be accorded the social and economic history of the arts and the humanities, and concentrate a far greater emphasis on a study of the works themselves. The truth that must now be recognized, I believe, is that the social history of art can mean nothing *but* politics to minds that are basically ignorant about what art is in itself, and what it isn't. It is the tendency of the social sciences to reduce the arts and the humanities to a level of materialist culture where distinctions between high art and popular culture and between art and politics are meaningless—and at that level what art is itself can no longer be discussed, for it is seen to consist of nothing but the sum of its social and economic attributes.

To speak specifically of the two fields I am myself closest to—the study of art history, and the study of literature—the approach I am advocating will entail a return to the very disciplines that have been so much under attack in recent years—so much under attack that in many of our leading academic institutions they have all but disappeared. In art history, it means the revival of training in connoisseurship—the close, comparative study of art objects with a view to determining their relative levels of aesthetic quality. This is a field in which our country could once boast of great achievements. From Bernard Berenson to Alfred Barr to Sydney Freedberg, we have indeed produced some of the greatest connoisseurs of Western art the world has seen, and their achievements and influence have greatly enriched our institutions and our lives—enriched them, I hasten to add, with aesthetic intelligence of the highest order. But these great names represent a dying intellectual enterprise. It isn't dead yet, but the prognosis is grave. In this respect, Sydney Freedberg's departure from Harvard earlier in this decade was for many of us a symbolic event, for it marked something more than the exit of a single individual from the institution that had virtually created the concept of connoisseurship in American cultural life. It represented the collapse of a tradition and the takeover of that institution by minds determined to transform the study of art into a form of social science. Which meant nothing less than the annexation of art history to the political service of the radical Left.

In the study of literature, the situation is equally grim—perhaps even grimmer, in some respects—and in this field there must also be a revival of what constituted, I believe, the closest analogue we have had in literary study to the tradition of connoisseurship in the visual arts, the New Criticism. It used to be said of the New Criticism—it was a favorite war cry of the Marxists—that in the emphasis it placed on studying the internal structure and meaning of a literary work it woefully neglected the role played by history in the formation of literary style. From my own studies with Allen Tate, Randall Jarrell, and others, I know this not to have been true, and it would be nonsense to claim that Southern writers like Tate or Robert Penn Warren, who themselves wrote nonfiction historical prose works early in their careers, were insufficiently aware of the role of history in the creation of great literature. The distinction that the New Criticism insisted upon—and which I believe the future integrity of literary study will depend upon—is the distinction that must always be made between text and context, between an understanding of the poem the poet creates (and I mean a line by line, word by word understanding) and an understanding of the world in which the poem is created and has its career. Without a revival of something like the emphasis, the priority, that the New Criticism placed on the analysis of the individual literary work and on works of the highest literary distinction, the study of literature in our

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universities can be little more than a study of rumor, reputation, and ideology. Without that emphasis on understanding the internal workings of great literature, its content—including its moral content—can only be taken on faith; and in the present context of literary study, that faith will inevitably be a political faith. It was for this reason that Brooks and Warren called their great textbook *Understanding Poetry*, for without a close, studied understanding of what the poem is and says, what is it that we can pretend we have understood about it? The New Criticism taught us to read the great works of our time and of all time, and in literary study there is simply no alternative to it.

In turning to the field of criticism of the arts and humanities outside the classroom, however, the situation we face is even more complex though no less dismal. For there is first of all so little that can legitimately be called criticism. Instead there is an avalanche of political discourse masquerading as criticism of the arts and the humanities. This being the case, I believe that criticism must be obliged to fight a two-front war—to advance the interests of connoisseurship and quality in its analysis of particular artists, writers, and scholars and *also* to engage in whatever critical combat may be required to set the record straight about the way politics has been allowed to distort artistic judgment and destroy whole areas of intellectual inquiry. Once again, I am not suggesting that this problem of political discourse masquerading as serious criticism will be solved by substituting our politics for those of our enemies on the Left. Our task, wherever it may be possible, is to try to expel the politicization of the arts and the humanities in order to allow them enough free intellectual air in which to breathe and grow. But to the extent that our own criticism must perforce be a political criticism, too, we need to be acutely conscious of the fact it is not by political means alone, or even primarily, that the recovery of the arts and the humanities in our society will be achieved. Politics *is* the problem, but it is only *in part* the solution.

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Berenson, connoisseurship, and the history of art

by S. J. Freedberg

Nineteen eighty-eight marked the hundredth anniversary of Bernard Berenson's first coming into Italy. The event was crucial in Berenson's biography, but its import goes far beyond this private meaning: it marks the inception of an accomplishment in the study and understanding of Italian art that we may characterize as the most embracing, and possibly the most influential, of this century. Art historians, and the wider public also, should remember with gratitude the moment at which it was determined that this accomplishment should come to be. Berenson was then only twenty-three, a young man of exceptional intelligence, attractiveness, and culture. He had graduated a year before from Harvard College, where he had devoted himself mainly to the study of languages and literature. Church-mouse poor, he had managed with subventions from wealthy friends (Isabella Stewart Gardner especially) to spend the intervening year in Europe, principally in France, England, and Germany; and while still concerned to develop his literary skills, he had in this time increasingly become interested in the visual arts. Berenson's descent into Italy, however, and his exposure to the vast artistic treasury of Italy, had an effect on him like a Pauline illumination: it confirmed an absolute priority for his interest in the study of art, of Italian paintings of the Renaissance in particular, and affirmed the entire dedication of his energies and gifts to that study.

The sense of inspiration and excitement to be found in Berenson's correspondence from this time suggests that we may be dealing with an order of experience that is more than merely personal. The excitement of Berenson's response to facets of the previous year's European travel had been considerable, in Britain and especially in Oxford, where he had found fulfillment of that to which, in America, only the Harvard of that time aspired. Nevertheless, nowhere before Italy had his response to his environment seemed so extraordinarily alive—so communicative of a sense of liberation, of the simultaneous discovery of self and surroundings, and of their (as it seemed) preordained harmony with each other. There is in this response something that seems a resonance of racial and historical mystique. The tone of Berenson's correspondence conveys not just the magnetism which the Mediterranean world exercises on persons of North European background, as Berenson in fact was, in a transplanted variant, but a sense of expansiveness and warmth that is like the mood of a homecoming. In the multilayered cultural construct that the young Berenson was—East European, American, Bostonian, Harvardian, temporary Episcopalian, and ineradicable Jew—it was the last that was the bedrock substance on which all the rest was overlaid. With Berenson's response to his discovery of Italy we may be in the presence of a mythic sense of recovery and redemption that might be

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felt by a Jew returned from Diaspora to the ancient Mediterranean homeland.

The complex cultural phenomenon that the young Berenson already was when he arrived in Italy was not of itself unique; what gave it special meaning and rare potential for creative action was the particular individuality to which it was attached. Berenson had the acutest consciousness of his exceptional resources of talent and personality; his occasional attempts at modesty (as in his early letters to Mrs. Gardner) rarely ring true. He came to maturity in a cultural climate that esteemed the development of individuality, even though a young man in Berenson's original social circumstances would not, in the late Eighties and Nineties of the last century, normally have found the means to such development, or found the way easily open to him. That he found the means, and made his way so swiftly toward the individuality he did so remarkably achieve is a demonstration, all at once, of brash presumption, indomitable self-esteem, and brazen courage. No less than the kind of object he chose for his self-dedication, the individuality that Berenson thus realized was a work of art, shaping and defining itself by constant interaction with the artifacts of art, and shaped like them by a mind, eye, and hand no less skilled in manipulating the relationship between artifice and reality.

Villa I Tatti, Berenson's Italian home, was the frame not only for the painted and sculptured artifacts that Berenson assembled in it but also for the work of art he had become. The villa was meant, from a relatively early time in Berenson's career, to be a monument to himself and what he had accomplished. And, like most monuments, it was meant at the very same time to perpetuate *and* to supplant the actuality it recalled. When Berenson gave I Tatti to Harvard, he made a kind of expiation for what he had found it necessary to do, contrary to his ideal of self, in order to create that very self; the gift to the university, as to the church, absolved and sanctified both gift and giver. Less obvious (and here I am on less certain ground), the gift could atone for the circumstance—untidy to one of Berenson's generation, background, and social milieu—that he had not been born to the ownership of it.

The human artifact that inhabited this handsome frame was, obviously, the product of an ego of extraordinary dimension. It seems almost a contradiction then to insist, contrarily, how ultimately selfless Berenson was, how dedicated he was to the matter he wrote about. That is not to say that his writing was exempt from an exceeding consciousness of self, or that he was free of manner and display. Beneath the frequent evidence of these, however, we discern the profound sincerity that inhabits what he has written: his words carry a force of intellectual and moral conviction that conveys the weight and impact of felt truth.

This impact is unfortunately blunted in our contemporary appreciation, and its moral weight diminished, by a phenomenon of literary style. We must not forget that it was Berenson's original ambition, before he turned to the visual arts, to be a man of letters: not just a writer in the ordinary sense of writing reportage or narrative but in the most sophisticated sense of conveying cultural experience in words that work themselves with the effect of art. This aspiration, and the literary style he found to realize it, were wholly of his contemporary epoch—in its Anglo-Saxon aspect in particular—and when Berenson's first and very quickly celebrated books were published, the audiences of the time found them admirable. We shall never know the exact form or degree of Mary Berenson's editorial intervention, but it did not eliminate the air, unwelcome to us now, of didactic condescension—of preaching, on occasion—or the episodes of stiff-jointed, starchy prose, or the strained, self-conscious Paterisms. I cannot determine whether it is a good or bad thing that these time-bound disabilities in Berenson's literary style appear for the greatest part in the writings he meant to be the most serious—those with the most weighty didactic or philosophic burden. For Berenson did indeed possess a remarkable

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literary talent which he would display when it was his wish not to preach but to communicate—not to make generalizations but to convey the exact quality of actual experience. His language could then be masterly—flexible, deft, and brilliantly precise, and as finely nuanced in its descriptions as that of his best literary contemporaries. When his subject was not art history but his environment or the people in it—as in *Rumor and Reflection* (1952)—the sensibility, grace, and wit of his expression remind us, now that the sharp silver tongue is no longer here to give his words a voice, of the magic of his conversation.

It was in the nature of his time that Berenson should have been so much concerned in his writing not only with its worth as literature but with its didactic, philosophic, and, ultimately, moral values. Evident from the beginning of his career, the compulsion toward such writing became, in his later age, more urgent as he felt his beliefs subject to increasing challenge. His powers of argument were considerable but depended more on emphasis and reiteration than on reasoning. The observation I best remember from my single visit to Santayana—a visit I made forty-three years ago—was addressed to Berenson's merit as a philosopher: Berenson was, Santayana said, quite lacking in the capacity for systematic thought. Inspired as it may have been by a lack of charity at least, and by hostility at worst, Santayana's observation was correct. What was unique in Berenson was not his gift for making generalizations (they often had more value as aphorisms than as philosophic truth) but the very opposite: his gift for the perception and appreciation of particular experiences. It was the conjunction in him of the finest, searching sensibility and the most precise weighing, measuring, and referential intelligence that made Berenson so extraordinary. In the history of art, such a conjunction of qualities defines a connoisseur, and *that*, as we have always recognized (although Berenson himself recognized it only with reluctance) was the most substantial part of his wide accomplishment, and the most influential.

Despite his frequent inclination to theory and generalization, Berenson seems to have been unwilling to make connoisseurship the subject of a systematic or extensive review. His attitude toward such an exercise became one of impatience and distaste. The first sentences of his *Three Essays in Method* of 1927 read:

> I have had it for some time in my mind to write down, for once, what is implied in the verb, "I attribute," "he attributes." I have neither the leisure nor the patience to spin it out into the minutest threads. That kind of systematic treatise must be left to the successors of Benedictine industry, who flatter themselves that because they are exhaustive they are also scientific.

Earlier in his career, however, Berenson had planned a book on methods of art criticism, and in 1894 wrote a fragment of it, an essay called "The Rudiments of Connoisseurship"; no more of the book was ever written, and the essay alone was published only in 1902, in the collection included in the second series of *The Study and Criticism of Italian Art*. The essay informs us about Berenson's early *modus operandi* as a connoisseur; it is also dogmatic and surprisingly minute in focus. Unfortunately, it does not suffice or convince as an exposition of the platform on which Berenson's connoisseurship worked in the subsequent development of his career. He never gave us such an exposition except in an occasional, self-conscious, and not always satisfactory demonstration of his method, as in the *Three Essays in Method*.

I can hardly pretend to supply the principles and practice of Berenson's connoisseurship that he would not volunteer. But perhaps I can make some observations that my experience of Berenson's writing and conversation make me think he would have found acceptable, and also to venture beyond these into some notions of my own on the subject.

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Let me offer first a summary definition of connoisseurship and its purpose: the use of expert knowledge of a field (in this case, the history of art) to identify objects in it, determine their quality, and assess their character. In 1894, Berenson had been willing to define connoisseurship more roughly and succinctly as "the comparison of works of art with a view to determining their reciprocal relationship." The exercise may require a philosophical or theoretical basis, but in its actual application it is decisively pragmatic, concerned not with generalities but with the precise experience of specific things. The specific experience is the essence of connoisseurship, but its meaning can be determined only by relating and comparing within a field of knowledge. It is therefore virtually automatic that the single identification (both quantitative and qualitative) at which the act of connoisseurship arrives should be joined with other things that have been perceived to be its similes. Taken together, these similar objects constitute, in the areas of art that verge on craft or where there are no names, a stylistic group. But where history has allowed to exist the evidence of single personalities, and even their names, the result of connoisseurship is the definition of an individual artist. It was perhaps inevitable that connoisseurship, which re-creates aesthetically determined individuals from the past, should exert such an attraction on Berenson, who was so surpassingly the product of the cult of aestheticized individuality in his present.

The accumulation of the connoisseur's expert knowledge depends in considerable measure on two instruments, one innate and the other external. The first instrument is an exceptional gift of visual memory, which seems in most cases to be a natural concomitant of the disposition to be interested in aesthetic images. Berenson had this gift, of course, in the most extraordinary degree, but he reinforced it with an external resource, which was relatively new when he began: photographs of works of art. In the course of his years at I Tatti he created the formidable specialized archive which served not only him but, through his generosity, so many younger aspirants to connoisseurship in his field.

The usefulness of such an archive is tremendous, of course, but it is not without its limits. The aspirant-connoisseur may not always realize to what degree the photograph must be read in conjunction with the store of evidence within the visual memory: the photograph must, so to speak, be given life by the infusion of the connoisseur's recollection of the original work. No one knew this better than Berenson, who was probably the most impassioned and far-ranging collector of visual experiences that the profession of art history has ever known.

The problem with the photograph is not just one of color—which, indeed, we can now supply with considerable exactness. There is always some way in which the photograph (the color photo as well, even the most lavish dealer's transparency) is a distortion of the visual truth. There can be no challenge to the proposition that the most nearly dependable accuracy in the connoisseur's judgment can be secured only from his experience of the original work of art. This is not just a precept. For curators and museum administrators who back their judgments—and those of other connoisseurs—with other people's money, it is an unbreakable rule. It is only from the original that the connoisseur can accurately assess what, in the object before him, is in fact original: what has been lost by injury, and what has been altered by intrusions subsequent to the original making. Today, the connoisseur can have help toward this determination from scientific aids which, when Berenson began, were not yet thought of.

To that which the connoisseur has determined to be valid evidence he brings an apparatus of judgment which must be termed subjective: his own equipment of perception and response, and the functioning of his comparative memory. Of necessity, there are personal, subjective variables at work in this apparatus, but, as our practical experience demonstrates, it is the exception,

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not the rule, when they assert themselves to the point where objective judgment is excluded. It is, indeed, the obligation of the connoisseur—and, for those who practice connoisseurship with appropriate intellectual and moral rigor, it is the habit—to acquire self-knowledge of these personal, subjective variables and to see that they assert themselves only with discipline and in justifiable circumstances.

The whole subjective apparatus of the connoisseur must be disciplined so as to work in a mode I suspect may characterize not just connoisseurship but the process of interpreting much aesthetic experience. This mode requires, first, that the connoisseur—like an interpreter of music—put his subjective apparatus into a state of neutrality that, in effect, is equivalent to giving it the character of an objective instrument which stands ready to observe, weigh, measure, and record the data in the object. This effectively objective instrument must, so to speak, be switched on—infused, inspired if you prefer, with the intensest energy of attention, so that, even while the connoisseur is functioning at maximum sensibility as a receptor, he is also projecting his maximum powers of observation upon the work of art. It may help our definition of this process to think of an approximate analogue in the workings of a radar or sonar system. What may be thus thought of as a bi-directional process—the exchange of signals between the observer and the work of art—can result in what Berenson described as an identification of the observer with the object. Here, then, is a mode of union between subjective and objective, and, if only in pragmatic terms, a resolution of their difference.

It is also a weighing of the process toward objectivity that the stage that must follow on the connoisseur's assimilation of the evidence—assimilation *to* the evidence as well, as we have noted—is that of comparative reference to an established, and, in practical effect objectified, body of visual material to which a given work appears to have a relationship. The relationship between a given object and an image in the comparative material is rarely one to one, however, and if it seems so there may be grounds for suspicion. One cause of difference is the inventive change that we expect between an object of our study and the similes with it that we may discover. Another, more important, cause of difference is the place of a work within a temporal sequence. Each object of our study that is genuinely a work of art—and not merely a product of near-mechanical manufacture or low craft—is an event within an artist's process of development, and the manner of formation of the work will be in some discernible way peculiar to its moment. The making of a work of art is an historical event, and has a necessary place within the sequence of events most closely related to it. The connoisseur's task is thus not just to make a match of similes but to assess, within the similitude, the elements that are in process. The effort of the connoisseur must thus resemble the living process in which the work he studies was created. His act of identification, like those of any scholar of history, must function in a flexible yet precisely controlled dynamic; more often he is performing not a matching operation but an interpolation. On occasion, where the object of examination lies at the chronological extreme of a career, it is an extrapolation that is required. If interpolation is like the building of a bridge, extrapolation, obviously the more daring and difficult procedure, is a kind of cantilevering. There is a para-philosophical as well as a practical reason for stressing the temporal circumstance to which the work of art is fixed: its identification is incomplete without a date, at least within limits as precise as the evidence permits. An undated identification is, in the most literal sense, inconsequential.

Recognizing, as the connoisseur must do, that the simile he seeks is almost inevitably an imperfect match, and that there will be temporally determined variations not only between his object and his similes but among the closest similes themselves, it becomes necessary for the connoisseur to be especially aware of the variables with which he deals.

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Since entire coincidence is so rarely offered him, he must determine by how much an element of comparison can be permitted to diverge from the paradigm he has taken for a particular case—what the quantity of difference is that would allow, or exceed, credence. The procedure may be the severest test of the connoisseur's sensibility, but there is an at least partial, and partially objectifiable, control for it—that of determining experientially from parallel cases in the established corpus what the range of variation is. This control is applicable not only to variations in form but to a whole other major aspect within the connoisseur's process: his assessment of quality.

We have been speaking of the evidence acquired by the connoisseur and his modes of assessing it as if they were only quantitative, and I believe that, excepting only a very last stage in the process of connoisseurship, this may be true. Continuously, as he perceives and assimilates the evidence offered by his object, the connoisseur, in a process which is parallel to—and, in fact, simultaneous or virtually so with his quantitative analysis—assesses the quality of the artist's performance: the efficacy, convincingness, success, or half dozen other synonymous notions that are conveyed by the elements of which the work is comprised. "Quality" in this sense is, however, only one of the two principal meanings that the word possesses; the other, paradoxically, is quantitative—a quality of something is a property of it, one of the constituent elements that enters into the definition of its whole nature, as hardness is a quality of rock. The connoisseur arrives at his appreciation of the "quality" of his object (in the first sense) only through the study of its qualities in the second sense. This appreciation is, as I have suggested, not only simultaneous with his quantitative reading of the object but in practice indissoluble from it. There is no mystique involved, then, in the connoisseur's assessment of the quality of the work of art. It is to some extent necessarily subjective since it requires, for its final and inclusive determination, a complex synthesis of evidence, but that evidence is, as I have suggested, the product of quantitative observation.

I have been referring to the exercise of connoisseurship as if it applied in the main to elements of form, and—provided that due weight is given to the qualitative factor we have just discussed—this is in fact the case, and it was strongly stressed by Berenson in his early essay. Yet it is obvious that the content of expression in a work of art must enter into any judgment of its authorship, or of any other kind of historical identification the connoisseur may be required to make. All the processes which apply to the connoisseur's reading of formal properties are no less operative here—the comparison to similes, interpolation, extrapolation, the judgment of quality (in the accustomed sense), and the control of permitted variation. But even if the processes are the same, the expressive matter on which we may project them is not, and the measure of dependability the connoisseur may achieve in dealing with matters of content is drastically less than it is when he deals with the elements of form. The content of a work of art must of course be described with the physical, quantitative means at the disposition of the artist; but once thus described, content makes an immediate quantum leap into the region of subjective meaning. The connoisseur must read this meaning as accurately as he can, and take its evidence into his judgment, but he must do so with the realization that the factoring of so large a dose of subjectivity into his equation can compromise his entire enterprise.

As in any form of historical consideration, the products of the connoisseur's analysis must be subjected to testing for internal consistency—i.e., the elements of style must be consistent among themselves. Where the analysis of an object yields qualities (in both senses of the word) that seem disparate, discordant, or unassimilable to the larger body of evidence, the whole object must be considered compromised. The whole single object must be considered as a functioning

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gestalt which works without undue grinding of its gears, and by extension so must any group of objects that the connoisseur assembles in a corpus (as for an individual artist or a school). A novel element of form or of expression, if it is to be accepted as a credible property of the object and historically valid, must be incorporable within the existing gestalt, rearranging its totality and its manner of internal functioning to some degree but by no means disrupting it or making irresolvable dislocations.

The connoisseur's task is essentially no different now than it was when Berenson began his practice of the art, but the contemporary connoisseur has at his disposal a number of aids, the results of scientific advances, that Berenson did not. The most important are devices that assist our seeing: radiography in its multiple forms, infrared and ultraviolet devices, and macro-photographs; most of these enable us to see beneath the present surface of a work of art into its previous gestation, often with valuable results. Other devices serve by the application of chemical or physical science: analyses of pigments and of varnishes, dendrochronology and thermoluminescence. These devices contribute, at times with decisive weight, to the evidence on which the connoisseur must exercise his judgment. Because such evidence comes from outside the realm of perception, however, it is ancillary to the connoisseur's mode of operation. Chemical and physical data are largely (though not always) objective, but the visual aids yield data that is objective only in the same sense that the object itself is: before they can be turned to evidential use the connoisseur must exercise upon them exactly the same interpretative skills and controls that he uses on the object itself.

I have no more than summarily indicated the nature and the processes of the connoisseur's task, but I hope that I have conveyed something of its complexity, and a notion of the knowledge, sophistication, and discipline that it demands. I hope that I have also demystified connoisseurship a bit, so that it does not appear—as is sometimes the case with the most expert connoisseurs (on occasion purposely)—to be a kind of sleight of hand, an almost casual, offhand cleverness. Above all, it needs to be stressed that connoisseurship is not a product of that unfathomable, non-rational, and animal-seeming thing that is called "intuition." "Intuition" is no more than the shorthand process, computerlike in its swiftness, with which the most expert connoisseur acquires and enters data into his mental bank of remembered similes, then compares, analyzes, and arrives at a solution. The process may seem computerlike not only in its speed but in the basic mechanism of comparison it employs; but this does not in any way demean the connoisseur, for no artificial intelligence can supply the sensibility of perception or the almost infinite calculus of variables that the connoisseur supplies to his personal and internal intellectual machine.

Before the days when an analogy, however partial, between connoisseur and computer was possible, Berenson was among the most phenomenally gifted, and probably the most demonstrably brilliant, of the connoisseurs of his time. Recently, however, Berenson's reputation has been subjected to grave and unwarranted injury—at the hands, be it noted, not of any qualified art historian, and certainly not any serious scholarly biographer, but of sensation-seeking journalists whose effrontery (or malice, indeed) is matched only by their ignorance of the history of art and of the role of connoisseurship in it. The burden of these attacks is that Berenson's connoisseurship was not always an instrument of scholarship but a tool that he could, and did, manipulate to his financial advantage. The most recent, conscienceless, and base attack, by Colin Simpson, has been dealt with most decisively in the public press by Sir John Pope-Hennessy and requires no further remark. A previous assault on Berenson, by Meryle Secrest, lays more claim to a degree of credibility because it is

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made in the appendix to a cleverly written though unsympathetic biography and pretends to an appearance of professionalism. This appendix lists, and offers some comment on, forty-eight instances (over a period of some seventy years) in which Berenson changed his mind about an attribution, allegedly for reasons of monetary gain. When Professor Ernest Samuels was working on his admirably sound and scholarly biography of Berenson, I undertook to examine for him Miss Secrest's list of Berenson's supposedly ill-motivated re-attributions. I found only one case where it might be possible to doubt Berenson's *bona fides*, although I do not have full information on the matter. It is worth noting that some of the instances where Secrest, in her ignorance both of art history and the art market, supposed Berenson's re-attribution was meant to raise a picture's price the result was precisely the opposite. To the same end of assisting Mr. Samuels, I surveyed the history of Berenson's relationship with Isabella Stewart Gardner—the one relationship in his career in which he is the most nearly identifiable in the role of agent-dealer. My comparison of the opinions of recent scholarship with the attributions given by Berenson to works he sold to Mrs. Gardner in the twenty-seven years of their connection, from 1894 to 1921, revealed that more than eighty percent of Berenson's opinions are still valid. Recognizing the great development of art historical research and of technical aids to connoisseurship that have come within this century, especially in the seventy-odd years since Berenson's relationship with Mrs. Gardner ceased, one cannot but conclude that this sample record of Berenson's accuracy as a connoisseur—in circumstances where he was most directly exposed to the mores of the art market—confirms both the quality of his connoisseurship and the morality with which he practiced it.

The function of connoisseurship within the history of art is central and indispensable. Those who are uncomfortable with this assertion may insist that the means and processes of connoisseurship remain, still, too subjective, and too frequently invite abuse. Practical experience of the latter circumstance especially lends some weight to this complaint, but not to a degree that can be thought to invalidate the discipline. In any case, no substitute has evolved. Art history asserts of course that it *is* history and thus must base its considerations upon facts, not all of which can be given warranty by objective means like documents. It therefore follows that we must rely for the rest of our historical data on the nearly objective, or objectifiable, evidence of connoisseurship. It is possible that certain kinds of writing about art—those that are the products of a para-philosophical or mainly critical view—should do without an accumulation of historical evidence, and it is also possible that in some fields an art historian of strict positivist inclination should write an account that needs no facts beyond those which documents provide. But a positivism that would set the evidence of connoisseurship aside would result in a grave impoverishment. Even in the study of architecture, connoisseurship must be taken as an instrument necessary to the making of art history, following in logical sequence close upon the historian's beginning step of gathering documentary information—without which the evidence produced by the connoisseur lacks moorings to time, place, and person.

Connoisseurship serves all kinds of art history, but it has a special relationship to the history of style, and, I believe, a special attraction to its practitioners. As we have observed, the process of connoisseurship requires the most scrupulous and responsive examination of the object taken under scrutiny. This examination is principally applied to the forms that the artist has defined by visual means—shapes, lines, colors, lights and darks: the visually apprehensible sensuous matter of the work of art or, in other words, its aesthetic substance. By his examination of this aesthetic substance and of the manner in

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which it has been manipulated into an entity, the connoisseur has inescapably arrived at an assessment of the elements of style and their mode of union, mainly in terms of form. Then, proceeding to relate individual objects into the classes and sequences they seem to call for, the connoisseur makes categories which are at least in summary those of a history of style.

The boundary at which connoisseurship passes into art history in a broader sense is both flexible and arbitrary, but the distinction between them may be expressed as one of purpose and result: for the one, a finely commented taxonomy; for the other, a correlated, synthesized account. The historian of style, or the connoisseur who has in the course of his argument translated himself into a historian of style, will for this different purpose frequently assign a very different significance, and a different evidential value, to matter he has just considered as a connoisseur. And matters treated with one weight or complexity as problems of the connoisseur may, in the context of a larger art historical approach, change measurably in shape and density. There is an important distinction to be made between connoisseurship and the history of style, but one must nonetheless affirm the essential ground they share: a primary concern with the aesthetic substance of the object, which serves as an open bridge between these linked and reciprocally reinforcing disciplines.

If the connoisseur's assessment of content in a work of art calls for reticence, because the subjective value introduced thereby into the body of evidence could weigh excessively within the connoisseur's measurement, no comparable deviation threatens the art historian, least of all the historian of style. The structure of analysis and interpretation the art historian builds is of an elaboration and density that the connoisseur does not seek, and it is less easily unbalanced by the inclusion of subjective matter. In any case, as even the most dedicated formalist admits, the elements of form at the least imply emotional meanings, and at the most proclaim them; and in almost every work of art of merit that illustrates some expressive content the meaning of this content and that conveyed by elements of form intersect and reinforce each other, and are in functional fact inseparable. It is for this reason that the historian of style must not permit "style" to be defined in terms of form alone: the "style" of a work of art (or of a class of works) is a characterization not just of its world of forms and the manner of their manipulation but of its world of feelings and ideas and *their* manner of manipulation. The historian of style grows, thus, beyond the range, as well as the depth, of the matter that had engaged him in his prior guise of connoisseur, and embraces a phenomenon of which the realm of meaning and of feelings tends to be wider and vastly more complex.

The connoisseur who works in this adjoining field of history of style is likely to bring to it a further inclination in a direction that, as much or more than the investigation of feelings and states of mind, may be considered subjective: that is the practice of what is defined, in a very arbitrary use of the word, as critical writing (as distinguished from objective or verifiably "historical" writing). This inclination in a person of a connoisseur's background is understandable: the exercise of the fine-tuned sensibility required of the connoisseur and his constant and acute responsiveness to the quality of the works he studies are, after all, the base components of the critical faculty. Their transfer from connoisseurship into the writing of the history of style is not a compromising of that history but, oppositely, a vast enrichment of it—provided, of course, that the critical faculty is exercised with strictest discipline. Works of art are in a situation better than that of musical scores but rather like them, too, in that, though potentially eloquent, they are mainly mute and need interpretation to give them voice. That is why what is called critical writing must be joined to pure history to fulfill the whole mission of the writer of art history: one is needed to complete and fulfill the other. Without a critical component, the

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history by itself will often be a truncated exercise.

Moreover, it is in the critical aspect of the writing of art history, much oftener than in the merely expository prose of historical accounts, that art-historical writing may aspire to the condition of literature; it is here that the writing about art may itself aspire to the status of art. I do not approve of critical writing which, whether by misguided intention or otherwise, displaces the work of art in the attention of the reader. Still more emphatically, I reject the kind of writing that endeavors to translate the work of visual art into an equivalent in words. It should not be the endeavor of criticism to translate the visual work into words but to translate it *by means of* words. The writer in his guise of critic is, no less than the historian, the servant of his subject.

Perhaps my rough sketch of connoisseurship, although different certainly in style, is not too different in substance from what Berenson might have set out. Perhaps, too, my description of the kind of art history with which connoisseurship is most closely allied—and which, almost a century after Berenson first began to write, still may claim to be the central, as well as most enduring, kind of art history—is not too far from his own idea of it. Nevertheless, Berenson might have wished to argue with my description of the character and workings of these disciplines on one major ground: my lack of insistence on their philosophical and moral bases; for beneath the complex vicissitudes of his experience, and behind the legerdemain he worked with his brilliant personality, Berenson was made of the spiritual stuff of a Prophet of the Old Testament.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the recent publication of Elizabeth Spires's *Annonciade* (Viking, $17.95), a collection of poetry, and Joseph Epstein's *Partial Payments* (Norton, $18.95), a collection of literary essays. Several of the poems in *Annonciade* and several of the essays in *Partial Payments* were originally published in *The New Criterion.*

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Pierre Monteux and the criterion of success

by Samuel Lipman

It may safely be said that personal striving—vulgarly called ambition—is the hallmark of modernity. To be satisfied with one's lot, we are told, is to default on our duty to self and world alike; to be all that one can be, and perhaps even a bit more, seems the only success we can have fully within our grasp.

Pierre Monteux does not fit well into our contemporary world of push and shove, get up and go. Those who were privileged to know him as a teacher remember a musician *pur sang*, a man of simple pleasures and worldly interests but always a man of the most total devotion to a Platonic ideal of music and its performance. For example, his students inevitably have graven on their minds his conception of the *tempo juste*: the speed neither too fast nor too slow at which a piece of music is not just plausible but *right*. Indeed, the truth is that for this sometimes jolly, sometimes irascible giant of musicality, there never were two ways about anything musical, as there were no two ways about his own relationship to his art: by the very rules of his being, music was life, and life was music.

It cannot be said that Pierre Monteux was unrewarded by the fates for his dedication. He has an assured place in the musical history of our century as the courageously persistent conductor of the 1913 premiere in Paris of Stravinsky's (and Diaghilev and Nijinsky's) *Rite of Spring*; in addition, he conducted the premieres of Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and *The Nightingale*, Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*, and Debussy's *Jeux*. A winner (with Jacques Thibaud) of a *premier prix* at the Paris Conservatoire, he was already a conductor by 1887, when at the age of twelve he led an orchestra "in Paris and elsewhere"—as the *New Grove* tells us—with the pianist Alfred Cortot as soloist. In a conducting career that spanned almost eight full decades, Monteux led the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1919 to 1924, served as the second conductor (after Mengelberg) of the *Concertgebouw* in Amsterdam from 1924 to 1934, founded the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris in 1929, serving as its conductor till 1938, and became the music director of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in 1936, where he remained until 1954. In a brilliant Indian summer, the seventy-seven-year-old Monteux began an international career as a guest conductor, returning repeatedly to Boston and even for a short time gracing the Metropolitan Opera with his sure grip of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. Above all, he was successful in England, where in 1961 (at the age of eighty-six, and just three years before his death) he accepted an appointment as chief conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra.

Monteux began to make records in Paris in the early days of the electrical process.[1]

1 In this regard, it is a special pleasure here to thank the conductor John Canarina, my friend and fellow student at L'Ecole Monteux in Maine in the 1950s, for his kindness in supplying me with invaluable tapes of all too scarce Monteux recordings.

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These first efforts included a ragged 1929 *Rite of Spring*[2] and a volcanic 1931 Ravel *La Valse*.[3] A bit later, he collaborated on several recordings with the adolescent Yehudi Menuhin. Among their work together is the classic 1932 performance of the Bach Concerto for Two Violins, in which Menuhin is joined by his teacher, Georges Enescu.[4] Profiting by the dearth of new material coming out of Europe during World War II, Monteux made many remarkable discs in San Francisco, ranging from Beethoven and Brahms through Chausson and D'Indy to Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky.[5] In the mid and late 1950s he made the now-standard Boston recordings of the fourth, fifth, and sixth symphonies of Tchaikowsky[6] and of Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*.[7] Finally, there were numerous recordings for Philips and Decca in Europe, including all the Beethoven symphonies and some of the masterpieces of the French literature. In a sadly belated tribute to Monteux's genius in opera, EMI brought out a marvelous complete *La Traviata* under his direction.

No assessment of Monteux's career could possibly fail to mention his dedicated work as a teacher. He founded the *Ecole Monteux* in France in 1932, and with the coming of World War II moved it to the simple village of Hancock on the coast of Maine. For Monteux, a school was about teaching and learning, not administrative redundancies, about music-making, not career empire-building. The hundreds of aspirants who came to him over the years were taught not just how to *conduct* music but how to *construe* it. For Monteux, music was not a matter of feelings. It had its own ontology, an independent existence: now serene, now lively, now sensuous, now stormy. If his students were talented—very talented, I should add—they might divine what music was and how it went; if they were not, it was a good idea for them to get out of the way instanter. Direct and tough, witty and sometimes barbed, Monteux's performing injunctions were based on his own complete musical knowledge and perfect ear; as his final approving audience, he had in mind no one but Euterpe and her sister Muses.

How far away is the musical world of today from the world of Pierre Monteux! A new year has just dawned in our calendar, but I think none of us is so foolhardy as to think that with the change in calendar will come a better era in music. Those of us who owe so much to Monteux—those of us, that is, for whom the expression *Harmonielehre* suggests Arnold Schoenberg, not John Adams—cannot but look with dismay at today's paucity of significant new works, so unlike the constant replenishment of the repertory that took place before Monteux reached the biblical promise of threescore and ten years. Similarly, it is dismaying to find so many of the new "superstar" conductors—I will forebear listing their names so as not to assist the mills of public relations—conducting fewer and fewer pieces in less and less interesting ways. As the CD has replaced the LP, we realize that we have no interest in Herr X's *Eroica*, in Sir Y's

2 This performance, although interesting in itself, is vastly inferior in finish to Monteux's later remakes of *The Rite of Spring* in San Francisco, Boston, and Paris. It has just been issued in England, accompanied by a 1928 performance of *Petrushka* conducted by the composer, on Pearl GEMM CD 9329.

3 Along with much other choice material performed by some of the greatest French artists of the interwar period, this gem was released in 1987 on a *La voix de son maitre* LP set, *Ravel et ses interprètes*, as EMI 2912163.

4 This exemplary performance, so redolent of an era before Bach playing was seen as an archeological enterprise, is just now available on an EMI CD, packaged with two other Bach concertos, played by Menuhin and conducted by Enescu.

5 Many of these recordings were available in the early and mid-1980s in excellent LP transfers on the French RCA *Cycle Monteux*.

6 The Tchaikowsky Fourth Symphony is available on casette tapes as RCA AGK1-5254 and Victrola ALK1-4772; the Fifth Symphony is similarly available as Victrola ALK1-5385.

7 *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* are now available on a single CD reissue as RCA 6529-2-RG.

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Messiah, or in Maestro Z's *Rigoletto*. And yet the CDs keep coming, and the music directorships of American orchestras continue to go to an epigonic generation of European conductors who are paid astronomic salaries for part-year work. Many of us, indeed, think of *Maître* Monteux—for so he was ineluctably called—and we weep.

We weep for ourselves because we have not his like today. But we weep also for him, because we realize that by today's standards Monteux wasn't really all that successful. His reputation, like whatever monetary compensation he earned, pales into insignificance beside what was accorded to such estimable figures as Arturo Toscanini, Leopold Stokowski, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Serge Koussevitzky, and Bruno Walter, to say nothing of today's star conducting personalities.

To begin with, Monteux always received, and receives to this day, surprisingly little discussion in the critical press. To cite more or less at random from two books I happen to have on my own shelves: in Harold C. Schonberg's *Great Conductors* (1967) Monteaux receives a scant three pages—as part of a chapter on "The Modern French School"—rather than the separate and extended chapters devoted to the truly famous; worse, he is not discussed at all in Kurt Blaukopf's *Great Conductors* (1955), a survey which manages to find room for the likes of Adrian Boult, Paul Kletzki, Josef Krips, and Hermann Scherchen. Monteux was never the subject of the Great Human Being worship that is traditionally reserved for those perceived to be the major performing musicians of the moment; even in the London musical world where he was so successful at the end of his life, he never received the canonization so fulsomely awarded to Otto Klemperer for the Divine Services of Beethoven symphonies he presented at the Royal Festival Hall.

The fact is inescapable that when it mattered most, Monteux was not the music director of a great world orchestra rooted in a great world city. While conductors of approximately his age conducted in New York, Boston, and Berlin (in Philadelphia, Stokowski had already created a great orchestra and left), Monteux only emerged from San Francisco for infrequent guest conducting appearances. Even when he began a life of international guest conducting, he still lacked—and was to lack for the remainder of his life—the secure power base provided by the music directorship of a great orchestra.

Then, too, Monteux made fewer recordings in San Francisco than Toscanini made with the NBC Symphony Orchestra and Koussevitsky with the Boston Symphony; and he made many fewer than Ormandy in Philadelphia. Unlike Toscanini, whose weekly NBC radio broadcasts during the winter season were nationwide events, unlike Stokowski, whose every musical sigh was available on screen and radio, and unlike whoever was conducting the weekly broadcasts of the New York Philharmonic, Monteux was restricted to a few hour-long broadcasts each year on a Pacific Coast radio hookup.

As we look for the reasons why Monteux did not have a greater career, we must begin with the fact that his incarceration was on a West Coast not as yet tied to the East by jet air travel. There can be no argument: the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in the Monteux years, for all of the yeoman work he did there, was not a great orchestra. Despite the city's unsurpassable physical beauty, San Francisco has never been able to compete for intellectual excitement or serious cultural activity with Chicago and the great cities of the East. A cultivated core audience and a vastly sophisticated group of patrons supported Monteux loyally for sixteen years, but the total audience remained limited, and as a result the season was relatively short. As important, the musicians union, always distrusting of outlanders, made it difficult and often impossible for Monteux to improve the orchestra's personnel; as a result, the kind of finely textured ensemble he did succeed in building in San Francisco lacked its proper complement and permanent foundation in individual instrumental excellence.

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Just how great the distance was separating the San Francisco orchestra from the majors is poignantly demonstrated by two reviews Monteux received in the mid-1940s from the subtly discerning Virgil Thomson, then at height of his power as the chief critic of the New York *Herald Tribune*. In 1944, Monteux conducted the New York Philharmonic[8] and elicited the following observation from Thomson, one that, in its implicit judgments of the orchestra's usual performance standards, applies equally to the Philharmonic of today:

> Pierre Monteux's two-week visit as guest conductor of the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra, which ends today, has led music lovers of all schools (the critical press included) to two conclusions: namely, that this conductor has drawn from our orchestra more beautiful sounds and more beautiful mixtures of sound than any other conductor has done in many years, and that his readings of Brahms are highly refreshing . . . . It has remained for Pierre Monteux to achieve what many of us thought was hopeless. He has made the Philharmonic play with real beauty of tone, many kinds of it, and with perfect balance and blending—to sound, in short, like an orchestra, a real, first-class orchestra requiring no apology.

But lest one think that all that counts is the conductor, here is Thomson on a Monteux concert with the San Francisco orchestra less than three years later:

> Pierre Monteux, who conducted his own orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony, last night in Carnegie Hall, is one of the greatest among living conductors. His orchestra, unfortunately, on account of budgetary limitations, is not so perfect an orchestra as he is a musician . . . . Both the brasses and the woodwinds of this orchestra are of good quality. It is the strings that are weak . . . . All the animated passages sounded last night, in consequence, in spite of Mr. Monteux's admirable tempos and careful phrasing, a little rowdy.

Others, less discerning in taste and less acute in hearing than Thomson, have identified Monteux's problem as a lack of "personality." Thus, in David Wooldridge's *Conductor's World* (1970), Monteux is patronizingly compared to Koussevitzky and found wanting in certain crucial respects:

> Whatever may have been the merits of the late Pierre Monteux—*and as a conductor he possibly possessed greater musicianship than did Koussevitsky* [emphasis added]—he could not by any stretch of the imagination have been called a personality in the sense that that term is usually intended to convey. His extreme vanity and exaggerated sense of *amour propre* were never of an order to sustain the burden of the great tradition of musical personalities who—though their nature be extrovert or introvert—must always be *seen* to be musical personalities, and larger than life. In the language of our American friends, Monteux was, in short, something of a "cold fish."

Whatever the merits of Mr. Wooldridge's characterization of Monteux, he has identified an aspect of Monteux's art that might strike the ignorant (a category that perhaps includes Mr. Wooldridge) as indeed responsible for a "personality" deficit. I refer here to Monteux's insistence on improving the taste of everyone involved, players and listeners alike. Monteux was, I suspect by design, a teacher in everything musical he did, not just when he instructed the young but also, and above all, when he performed. To his students, he taught the technical material of conducting; to his players and his listeners he taught the repertory and the proper fashion of its performance.

In the area of repertory, Monteux pro-

8 Monteux's appearances outside San Francisco were so infrequent that during his California years he only conducted the Philharmonic twice, once for two Sunday concerts during the summer season of 1943, and once for two weeks during the 1944-45 regular season.

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grammed unfamiliar, difficult, and often new (and American!), twentieth-century music. (It should be remembered that during Monteux's years in San Francisco, this century was but a few decades old, and its radical break with the music of the past was relatively recent.) Because Monteux was a deeply proud Frenchman, he shifted the balance of the repertory away from the Austro-German classics—so beloved, for instance, of New York Philharmonic audiences of the 1920s and 1930s—and toward French music, from Berlioz to Milhaud and even Messiaen.

In performance, Monteux lessened the interest in superstar soloists playing superstar concertos, those fabulous star turns perceived to be so vital to the commercial success of most second-tier orchestras. He also brought to the music he conducted a performance style concerned with realizing the structure of the music and the details by which that structure might be articulated. He was, too, faithful to the text, not in today's quixotic sense of historical recreation, but in the rather more straightforward, if arduous, sense of clearly playing the right notes in tune, at the right tempo, in the right rhythm, and in the notated phrasing.[9]

I must assume that many people saw all this as stuffy didacticism, and perhaps even as pedantic moralism. It will rightly be objected that every major conductor, and every great musical performer, sees what he does in terms of black and white, of right and wrong; it will further be maintained, quite properly, that it is in communicating how artistic matters should be, rather than merely how they are, that great artists distinguish themselves from routine executants. But the conductors with the very greatest careers—here I particularly have in mind Toscanini, Furtwängler, and Stokowski—communicated their private visions of musical truth by directly powerful emotional means. At their best, these means, involving the use of what Thomson called the "wowing technique," were grandly eloquent, and the results profound[10]; at their worst, they were openly crass, and the results overwrought or sentimental. Even the musically refined Herbert von Karajan, in my opinion the greatest conductor to emerge since World War II, is not entirely free of the charge of vamping a gullible public through the projection of a spuriously prophetic and trancelike image on the podium.

Needless to say, Monteux did not see his task this way. He did not cultivate the body beautiful, but rather looked like a pear; he did not walk sinuously on the stage, but rather waddled; he didn't jump around while he conducted, but often seemed to disappear once the music had begun. His aural persona didn't call attention to itself, either. Monteux's musical model, not surprisingly, was French, and furthermore, I suspect, Ravel-French and not Debussy-French. I remember him reacting with noticeable irritation when anyone sloppily called the new French music written around the turn of this century "impressionist." No matter how fast the tempo Monteux demanded—and his tempos were often blindingly fast—everything had to be audible. The dynamics, too, had to be containable within a classical framework. To sum up, Monteux's goal for the performance of his beloved music was total clarity, not overwhelming impact. His message to all was

9 Just how far Monteux was from approving the historical performance movement may be judged from a story I heard as a young music student in San Francisco. (Though I heard it only second-hand, it has for me the ring of truth.) It seems that when Monteux was rehearsing a Bach keyboard concerto with a distinguished academic musicologist at the harpsichord, disagreements emerged between conductor and soloist—whereupon Monteux exploded in his ineffable Franco-American English: "Now I know why zee people 'ate Bach!"

10 This technique includes the use of extreme tempos and dynamic contrasts, and of constant rhythmic displacements and intensifications. The conscious aim, of course, is to compel the listener's attention at every moment; a further aim, which may be conscious or unconscious, is to fasten the listener's attention on the executant as the prime mover in vivifying the music.

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the same: if we do our job properly, the music will make its way, not ours.

Monteux's rustication with a regional orchestra in sunny California, his lack of identification with the standard works of the Austro-German repertory, his unphotogenic platform behavior, and above all his omnipresent pedagogic and self-effacing musical impulse—these factors plausibly explain why he didn't become one of the ballyhooed conductors of the age. To stop there, however, would be to settle for the kind of self-gratification we so comfortably satisfy when we say, in thundering imitations of Dr. Johnson, "The public, Sir, is a great fool!" To stop there, it seems to me, would be to do less than full justice both to the musical public and to the surrounding world in which music must make its way.

It goes without saying that our century has been a time of unprecedented cataclysms, of wars and liberations, of revolutions and tyrannies, of weapons of destruction and potions of healing, of supreme hopes and terrifying disappointments. It has also been a time of involuntary movements of peoples perhaps unprecedented in history. Viewed against this tumultuous background, music—and the other arts as well—can hardly fail to be buffeted by forces beyond its control. The same impotence which thus must affect a mere art must also mark the lives of its practitioners.

So we must not be surprised that musical careers will reflect their times, and that great careers will greatly reflect the world which makes them possible. To make this point concretely, we might consider two powerful images, each tightly bound up with the career of a great conductor. The first image, out of the career of Toscanini, is heroic and indeed triumphant; the second, from the career of Furtwängler, is horrifying.

To begin with Toscanini: imagine, if you will, a summer day in the spacious gardens surrounding Triebschen, the beautiful lakeside villa just outside Lucerne in Switzerland. It was here that Richard Wagner, between 1866 and 1872, completed *Der Meistersinger*, practically completed *Siegfried*, and wrote and first performed (as a gift for his wife on the birth of their son) the *Siegfried Idyll*. The time now is August 25, 1938 *Anschluss*, Hitler's unresisted rape of Austria. There is again music at Triebschen, very much including Wagner, but it is not performed by the composer; in the audience one will not find, as had been possible in happier days, Franz Liszt and Friedrich Nietzsche. Instead, the conductor is Toscanini, no longer willing to be a guest at Salzburg, and eager to demonstrate his opposition to Mussolini and Hitler as the inevitable European war draws near. In the audience are, in the words of Harvey Sachs, "Italian music lovers and the cream of Italian society"; for these listeners' pains, their automobile license plate numbers are taken down by fascist informers, and the names of the owners are published in the Italian press.

We will hardly have such an edifying picture from the life of Furtwängler. Here I have in mind the splendid photograph of the conductor in action which adorns the jacket of an epochal concert recording by him of the Beethoven Seventh Symphony.[11] Both photograph and recording were made in the old Philharmonic Hall in Berlin before its destruction; the performance took place at the end of October or perhaps the beginning of November, 1943. Think back to the days when the concert was given: the bloody German retreat from Russia in progress, the Allied bombing offensive taking out German cities by day and by night, Italy already driven out of the war, the Holocaust more horrible with each passing day—and Beethoven goes on. To tell us how it felt to be in the Philharmonic Hall itself, we have the jacket photograph, showing an absorbed audience massed behind Furtwängler and the orchestra. Verily, the dream within and the nightmare without, but amidst the horror: music and musicians, the dead Beethoven and the living Furtwängler, on the edge—the edge not of art but of life.

11 My copy of this recording, purchased in the mid-1970s, is on Unicorn (England) WFS8.

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I have chosen these two images, the one sublime and the other grotesque, not to make an argument for the amorality of art, for I am not at all clear that the Furtwängler image tells us anything more than that man, as part of his nature, bears the capacity to foul even his own most wonderful achievements. Instead, I have attempted to show how the great, and today unparalleled, careers of Toscanini and Furtwängler drew their resonance from the world outside music. When we think of them, we know they fully lived, one for glory and the other for shame—but we know they fully lived. Viewed against the touchstones of these careers, the dear, beaming, decent Pierre Monteux seems to have been forced by destiny to be but a great musician making beautiful music under conditions of peace.

Perhaps there is a lesson in Monteux's career for us in America, as we continue to wonder why our own composers and performers seem to lack the kind of universal status we expect musicians to be accorded. We in America have been fortunate: we have had no foreign wars on our soil in almost two centuries, and no major civil strife since the Civil War. Two world wars brought us victory and world power with little suffering; even Vietnam, as painful as it was, took place in a faraway country of which we knew nothing. Like the children from some happy fairy tale, we remain forever children, taking our heroes from the ranks of the real adults. Is it any wonder we are still waiting for our Toscanini or our Furtwängler?

The last word, however, belongs to Pierre Monteux. Fittingly, he now lies in the earth of the Maine he grew so much to love. One intuitively knows his fate to be something of what Goethe envisioned, for a poet-musician, in his immortal *Anakreons Grab*:

Wo die Rose hier blüht, wo Reben um Lorbeer sich schlingen,
Wo das Turtelchen lockt, wo sich das Grillchen ergötzt,
Welch ein Grab ist hier, das alle Götter mit Leben
Schön beplanfzt und geziert? Es ist Anakreons Ruh.
Frühling, Sommer und Herbst genoss der glückliche Dichter,
Vor dem Winter hat ihn endlich der Hügel geschützt.

(Where the rose blooms, where vines and laurel are entwined,
Where the turtle-dove calls, where the grasshopper takes his delight,
What is this grave, that all the gods with life
Have so beautifully planted and enlivened? It is Anacreon's repose.
Spring, summer, and fall supported the happy poet;
From the winter he has been protected, at last, by the hill.)

Is this success not success enough?

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Conrad Aiken's pilgrimage

by Bruce Bawer

To the typical person of middle age or younger with any interest at all in American literature, the name of Conrad Aiken is likely to be familiar, but probably little more than that. It may be a name that one has skipped past once or twice in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* on one's way to Wilfred Owen or Hart Crane; or one may recognize Aiken as the author of one or more widely anthologized short stories. Or perhaps one's first thought upon hearing Aiken's name will be of T. S. Eliot, with whom Aiken studied at Harvard College and in the now almost mythic story of whose career he played a modest supporting role as percipient critic, occasional contributor (to Eliot's magazine *The Criterion*), and admiring (if somewhat patronized) friend. Even if one knows a bit about Aiken's life and work, his name will probably tend to evoke vague thoughts of his versatility, productivity, and endurance (his first book appeared in 1914, his last in 1971) rather than bring immediately to mind a particular novel or story or poem. Indeed, one reason for many readers' unfamiliarity with Aiken's oeuvre may well be that his bibliography is downright intimidating. For the first question that someone interested in reading Aiken must ask himself is: Where to start? With the twenty-nine volumes of poetry that he published in his lifetime? (The second edition of Aiken's *Collected Poems*, published in 1970, contains over one thousand pages.) With his five novels? With his criticism, his letters, his plays, his short stories? (*The Collected Short Stories* runs to nearly six hundred pages.) How about with *Ushant*, the notorious autobiographical "essay" he published in 1952?

And now there is yet another item bidding for a place on the Aiken student's must-read list: Edward Butscher's enlightening but deeply flawed new book, *Conrad Aiken: Poet of White Horse Vale*, the first installment of a projected two-volume biography which follows Aiken from his 1889 birth in Savannah, Georgia to 1925, when, in the words of the jacket copy, "he stood on the threshold of both nervous breakdown and poetic success."[1] I shall return to this book—and to the subject of Aiken's tragic and troubled life—presently; suffice it for now to say that Butscher, whose heavily psychoanalytical approach to literary lives was manifested in his single previous contribution to the genre, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (1976), would seem to have found his ideal subject in Conrad Aiken. For Aiken, as much as Butscher, was fascinated by the theories of Freud, Jung, Adler, and company, and regarded literature as, above all, a means of exploring human consciousness. In this connection, a remark made by William Demarest, the protagonist of Aiken's highly autobiographical novel *Blue Voyage* (1927), may be of more than passing

1 *Conrad Aiken: Poet of White Horse Vale*, by Edward Butscher; University of Georgia Press, 518 pages, $34.95.

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interest: "It is my weakness as an author (so the critics have always said) that I appear incapable of presenting a theme energetically and simply. I must always wrap it up in tissue upon tissue of proviso and aspect; see it from a hundred angles; turn laboriously each side to the light; producing in the end not so much a unitary work of art as a melancholy *cauchemar* of ghosts and voices, a phantasmagoric world of disordered colors and sounds; a world without design or purpose; and perceptible only in terms of the prolix and fragmentary. The criticism is deserved, of course: but I have often wished that the critics would do me the justice to perceive that I have deliberately aimed at this effect, in the belief that the old unities and simplicities will no longer serve. No longer serve, I mean, if one is trying to translate, in any form of literary art, the consciousness of modern man. And this is what I *have* tried to do."

It was precisely to this end—the translation of the consciousness of modern man—that Aiken specialized for many years in an extremely long, loose, and repetitive kind of poem that he called a "symphony." By nature a traditionalist, an admirer of Victorian verse, and (in his youth) an eager imitator of the simple, strong, and very popular narrative poems of John Masefield, Aiken nonetheless sought to participate in the modernist revolution, and he plainly felt that, by eschewing many of the structural conventions of poetry and adopting in their place some of the structural conventions of music, he could represent the flow, the flux, the rhythms of human consciousness in a way that pre-modern verse had largely failed to do. The poems that he wrote in accordance with this theory—among them *The Jig of Forslin* (1916), *Senlin: A Biography* (1925), *The House of Dust* (1920), and *The Pilgrimage of Festus* (1923)—are notable for their graceful but prosy blank verse (which, like that in Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," often rhymes irregularly), their occasional lapses from this prosiness into clichéd "poetic" language and melodramatic imagery, and their dismaying lack of development. Reading these garrulous poems, one rarely feels as if one is getting anywhere; instead, one has the sensation of wandering back and forth over a relatively small stretch of cerebral terrain. At times Aiken seems to be writing quite deliberately (and reverently) under the influence of his friend Tom, but the intensity of Eliot is utterly missing here, and so is the sense, which one always has in Eliot, of the presence of a distinctive personality at the center of the poem. The speaker of the typical Aiken "symphony" comes across less as a flesh-and-blood individual than as a derivative, standard-issue Voice of Poetry.

In his prefaces to the "symphonies," Aiken describes his authorial intentions in the grandest possible terms. *Senlin*, he tells us, is about "the basic and possibly unanswerable question, *who and what am I*, how is it that I am I, Senlin, and not someone else?" The theme of *The Jig of Forslin* is "the process of vicarious wish fulfillment by which civilized man enriches his circumscribed life and obtains emotional balance . . . . Forslin is not a man, but man." *The House of Dust* "is a symphonic poem about the city—ancient or modern, it makes no difference—and the crowd-man that inhabits it"; the poem considers that "in the evolution of man's consciousness . . . and in his dedication of himself to this supreme task, man possesses all that he could possibly require in the way of a religious credo." As for the eponymous hero of *The Pilgrimage of Festus*, he "is anybody or nobody. His pilgrimage is not real: it is imaginary. It is a cerebral adventure, of which the motive is a desire for knowledge"; although Festus conceives of himself "as a conqueror with nothing more to conquer," he has yet to conquer "the world of himself; and into this world he resolves to set forth anew." Yet these poems are neither as cerebral nor as adventurous as Aiken would have us believe, for he himself is never truly as exploratory as his oddly named protagonists; he consistently gives the impression of having gone into these poems already knowing what his protagonists were going to discover—namely, a host

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of Freudian, Jungian, and related concepts. That the poems' protagonists are essentially interchangeable is underscored in the preface to "Changing Mind," wherein Aiken notes that the poem's "wholly anonymous hero" takes up where Senlin left off and "carries the analysis a step farther."

Yet to describe what happens in these poems as "analysis" is misleading. By turns melancholy and ironic in tone, Aiken's "symphonies" read for the most part like an Edwardian poet's attempts to enter the Age of Eliot and Freud. Indeed, at times they read like attempts to *be* Eliot, to recast "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (which Aiken had read, admired, and pushed on editors in manuscript) in less rigorous, more expansive language. *The Jig of Forslin* is especially rich in borrowings from Eliot's first great poem; unmistakably Prufrockian references to "Lazarus, raised from the dead," to drowning, to "sea-girls," to the making of decisions ("You say, the time has come to make decisions,—/Question and vacillation must be ended") are plentiful; in place of Eliot's "yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes," Aiken gives us "yellow footlights blazing before my feet" and a "light winked out/Behind the yellow shades"; in the manner of Prufrock, who speaks of how his "hair is growing thin," Forslin says, "You see me: I am plain: and growing baldish." Eliot's "Let us" formulation (as in "Let us go then, you and I") gets a good workout: "Let us lounge in a bright cafe, and listen to music—"; "Let us drown, then, if to drown is but to change"; "Let us pull off our gloves:/Open the doors, and take the air a while"; "Let us go up among the pinewoods,/Let us go up the wind, it is cooler there;/Let us go slowly along hot yellow beaches." Aiken seems particularly eager to outdo Eliot in the matter of coffee and coffee-cups:

> Vermouth, then coffee . . . How much shall we tip the waiter?
> Here the fatigued mind wanders and forgets.
> . . .
> Isolda, leaning among her coffee-cups,
> Smiles at me.
> Helen of Sparta, bearing a silver tray,
> Laughs at me.
> . . .
> With the same coffee before me, and between my fingers
> The same slow cigarette consuming in smoke;
> And in my ears an echo of music lingers,
> And the sound of a dying sentence that someone spoke.

Like Eliot in "Prufrock," Aiken in *The Jig of Forslin* sings the twentieth-century blues, while conveying—or attempting to convey—a sense of ennui, of despair, of the impossibility of enduring love in the modern world. Yet among the Eliotic chatter may be found lines and phrases more reminiscent of sentimental, crowd-pleasing Georgian verse than of High Modernism. "We blow in the air," Aiken writes, "like leaves our words are blown." (Leaves are ubiquitous in Aiken's fiction and poetry.) "And you do not hear the blood in my brain that cries,/'I love you, I love you, I love you.'" (Aiken never says anything important just once.) "Time . . . Time . . . Time/And through the immortal silence we may hear/The choral stars like great clocks tick and chime." (The words *immortal* and *silence* are both favorites of Aiken's.) But it is not only in *Forslin* that Aiken indulges in such rhetoric. "Out of a vast sarcophagus of cloud," he writes in *The Pilgrimage of Festus*, "Pours the black death of rain." And death and rain make an equally sensational appearance in *Senlin*:

> Hurry, spider, and spread your glistening web,
> For death approaches!
> Hurry, rose, and open your heart to the bee,
> For death approaches! . . .
> Death, huge in the star; small in the sand-grain;
> Death himself in the rain,
> Drawing the rain about him like a garment of jewels:
> I hear the sound of his feet

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On the stairs of the wind, in the sun,
In the forests of the sea . . .
Listen! the immortal footsteps beat!

To read one of these "symphonies" is to get the impression, eventually, that Aiken has almost nothing (or, at least, almost nothing original) to say, and that he is concerned mainly with working not-very-inventive changes on stock poetic formulas. It is, also, to note the stunning contrast between Aiken's and Eliot's poetic development. For while Eliot evolved dramatically from one major poem to the next, making extraordinary leaps in manner and perspective from "Prufrock" to *The Waste Land* to "The Hollow Men" to "Ash-Wednesday," Aiken's limp pentameter and banal treatment of his major themes—among them life and death, creation and consciousness, dreams and time, memory and desire—don't vary much from one "symphony" to another. The same handful of truisms—for instance, that life is a dream, that time is a dream, that life is delimited by time, that we all live in our own minds and can endure after death in the minds of others—is reiterated continually, and in the least imaginative of ways. Aiken even repeats words, phrases, and entire lines. His theoretical rationale for these repetitions is that in a real symphony the main theme is repeated and repeated again. But he seems to ignore the fact that classic symphonic form requires not merely repetition but variation and development. And the unfortunate truth is that there is simply not enough variation *or* development in Aiken's "symphonies." The critic J. G. Southwark makes a valid point when he says that Aiken fails to achieve the "significant form of a Haydn or Mozart symphony" and that he instead "gives us something more nearly akin to the diffuse symphonies of Bruckner or Mahler." But in their slackness, familiarity, and superficial prettiness Aiken's "symphonies" are less reminiscent of either Mozart or Mahler than of Mantovani.

Aiken's numerous non-symphonic poems and poetry collections—among them *Punch: The Immortal Liar* (1921), *The Coming Forth of Osiris Jones* (1942), *A Letter from Li Po and Other Poems* (1955)—take a remarkable variety of forms. There are sonnets and short free-verse poems; there are long monologues in blank verse and rhyming tetrameter; *Osiris Jones* looks like this most of the way through:

In a museum
visitors are requested not to touch the objects

In a concert hall
no admission after doors are closed

On an office door
Peter Jones

In a saloon
no treating allowed

Laundry-mark on linen
B69

Punch—which takes the form of an oral biography, as it were, of the fabled puppet (who is described by an acquaintance as "ugly and vile beyond all human knowledge")—is unexpectedly energetic and colloquial, and was, in its day, quite popular; today it seems little more than a curiosity, a period oddity. The relatively brief "Improvisations: Light and Snow," meanwhile, surprises one with its realistic touches and its controlled, unadorned language:

On the day when my uncle and I drove to the cemetery,
Rain rattled on the roof of the carriage;
And talking constrainedly of this and that
We refrained from looking at the child's coffin on the seat before us.
When we reached the cemetery
We found that the thin snow on the grass
Was already darkly transparent with rain;
And boards had been lain upon it
That we might walk without wetting our feet.

Aiken's best poems, indeed, are short ones, in which his ambitions seem more in

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line with the breadth and nature of his poetic gift. Some of his sonnets are very fine, and the most satisfying poetry in the "symphonies" may well be the uncharacteristically taut trimeter lines at the close of "Changing Mind," which can be read as a separate poem:

My father which art in earth
From whom I got my birth,
What is it that I inherit?
From the bones fallen apart
And the deciphered heart,
Body and spirit.

My mother which art in tomb
Who carriedst me in thy womb,
What is it that I inherit?
From the thought come to dust
And the remembered lust,
Body and spirit.

Father and mother, who gave
Life, love, and now the grave,
What is it that I can be?
Nothing but what lies here,
The hand still, the brain sere,
Naught lives in thee

Nor ever will live, save
It have within this grave
Roots in the mingled heart,
In the damp ashes wound
Where the past, underground,
Falls, falls apart.

Yet, for the most part, the long poem remained Aiken's specialty until the end of his life. Perhaps the most celebrated of all Aiken's longer poems, "symphonies" or otherwise, are *Preludes for Memnon, or Preludes to Attitude* (1931) and its companion volume, *Time in the Rock, or Preludes to Definition* (1936). (Memnon, it will be remembered, was a nephew of Priam, slain by Achilles and wept for every morning thereafter by his mother, Eos, the dawn.) These two massive documents, each of which consists of several dozen largely self-contained sections of thirty or so lines apiece, aim unabashedly at the sort of stately profundity that Eliot would achieve in his *Four Quartets*. Aiken addresses his usual themes in an impressive variety of ways, casting different sections in the form of sonnets, odes, elegies, dramatic monologues, fables, verse anecdotes, and so forth. For all his formal wanderings, however, he never wanders far afield from his fundamental questions: What is the conscious mind? How do two conscious minds relate to one another? How can art—poetry in particular—movingly and meaningfully represent the nature of this communion? At their best, these poems manage to suggest the poignancy of the poet's quixotic search for answers, and to convey the magnitude of his frustration at the ultimate inefficacy of words to limn a world. Aiken writes affectingly, for instance, in section V of *Preludes for Memnon*:

Despair, that seeking for the ding-an-sich,
The feeling itself, the round bright dark
emotion,
The color, the light, the depth, the feathery
swiftness
Of you and the thought of you, I fall and fall
From precipice word to chasm word, and
shatter
Heart, brain, and spirit on the maddening fact:
If poetry says it, it must speak with a symbol.

On the whole, however, *Preludes for Memnon* and its successor come across as pretentious and overupholstered. There is too much posing here, and too little sense of a poet truly grappling with an emotion or idea and trying to find the best words to express it; so frequently do certain locutions crop up that one begins to have the impression that the composition of the poems was less a matter of finding verbal equivalents to emotion than of fitting already selected words and phrases together into rhythmic sentences.

If I have dwelt at such length on Aiken's poetry, in spite of its manifold weaknesses, it is because Aiken is known mainly as a poet, because he identified himself mainly as a poet, and because Butscher, in his biography, places great importance on this self-

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identification. Yet it does not take long, after turning from Aiken's poetry to his longer fiction, to decide that he is considerably more successful as a novelist than as a poet. Or maybe it is more nearly correct to say that his novels, despite their shortcomings in overall design and in the development of character, have more than their share of absorbing, and even highly compelling, moments. It must be borne in mind, too, that Aiken's five contributions to the genre—*Blue Voyage* (1927), *Great Circle* (1933), *King Coffin* (1935), *A Heart for the Gods of Mexico* (1939), and *Conversation, or Pilgrims' Progress* (1940)—were hardly intended as conventional novels, with conventionally conceived plots and protagonists. On the contrary, they are extraordinarily idiosyncratic excursions—or, rather, incursions—which have been aptly described by R. P. Blackmur as "picaresque novels of the psyche." Opposite the first page of *Blue Voyage*, significantly, Aiken quotes Coleridge: "What is there in thee, Man, that can be known?/Dark fluxion, all unfixable by thought,/A phantom dim of past and future wrought,/Vain sister of the worm—." This is, one might say, Coleridge in his most Aikenesque mood, and the epigraph certainly captures the thematic thrust (and something of the spirit, too) not only of *Blue Voyage* but also of its four successors. For, whatever their ostensible settings, these novels, like Aiken's "symphonies," take place principally in the minds of their protagonists, and are concerned chiefly with the question of how well such minds—intelligent, ironic, inquisitive, and impossibly complex—can come to know themselves. Like *The Pilgrimage of Festus*, these novels are "cerebral adventure[s]"; like *Senlin*, they confront "the basic and possibly unanswerable question, *who and what am I*, how is it that I am I . . . and not someone else?" Yet the novels are not just "symphonies" in prose; in fact, they are a good deal more palatable than any of Aiken's longer poems, as fresh and lively as the "symphonies" are inert and derivative. Part of the reason for this difference, one imagines, is that outside of the realm of poetry Aiken may have felt less self-conscious, less compelled to adopt certain (inappropriate) forms or to assume a particular (pretentious) level of diction or to try to compete with anybody. At any rate, the elegant-but-unaffected language that makes so much of Aiken's poetry feel loose and prosy and Edwardian proves to be a positive asset in his novels; and whatever impulse drove him to infect his "symphonies" with so many false and melodramatic passages simply doesn't manifest itself in the novels.

This is not to suggest that Aiken's novels are plain and down-to-earth; it is only to state that the moments of intense contemplation which do figure prominently in these books are rendered in thoroughly believable form. It helps a great deal that Aiken takes the trouble to set a protagonist convincingly in motion, and to place him among other equally credible human beings, before getting down to the business of rendering at length that protagonist's deepest, most solemn thoughts. Yes, there is heightened rhetoric here by the bushel, as exemplified by this passage from *Blue Voyage*, in which Aiken memorably sets forth his view of the human individual as a universe unto himself:

> What was it he wanted? What was it that was driving him back? What was this singular mechanism in him that wanted so deliberately, so consciously, to break itself? A strange, a rich, a deep personality he had—it baffled and fascinated him. Everybody, of course, was like this,—depth beyond depth, a universe chorally singing, incalculable, obeying tremendous laws, chemical or divine, of which it was able to give its own consciousness not the faintest inkling . . . . He brushed the dark hair of this universe. He looked into its tranquil black-pooled eyes. Its mouth was humorous and bitter. And this universe would go out and talk inanely to other universes—talking only with some strange minute fraction of its identity, like a vast sea leaving on the shore, for all mention of itself, a single white pebble, meaningless. A universe that contained everything—all things—yet said only one

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> word: "*I*." A music, an infinite symphony, beautifully and majestically conducting itself there in the darkness, but remaining forever unread and unheard.

Heightened or not, however, this excerpt works as prose—rhythmically, dynamically, dramatically—in a way that the comparable passages in the "symphonies" don't work as poetry. It is, for one thing, expressed with more vigor, more energy, than is common in Aiken's poems. The language feels natural, not forced. And—very importantly—the excerpt appears in a text which also contains realistic dialogue and precise descriptions of the physical world; these things give the protagonist's musings a context, a *raison d'être*. In the novels, that is, such a passage as the one I have quoted may be understood as representing the state of mind of a vividly evoked human being, and is therefore of human—and, potentially, dramatic—interest; in an Aiken "symphony," by contrast, the protagonist is invariably impossible to visualize or to believe in, and accordingly one finds oneself in the position of having to accept his often tiresome and hyperbolic meditations entirely on their own terms—as, that is, disembodied philosophical propositions—or to reject them *in toto*.

While Aiken's novels have their splendid moments, the finest of Aiken's many short stories are themselves splendid moments. Perhaps the saddest irony of Aiken's career is that while his ambition propelled him to expend the bulk of his creative energies on long, avant-garde forms—book-length "symphonic" poems, stream-of-consciousness novels—his talent seems to have been far better suited to short poems and (especially) to short stories of a more conventional nature. Certainly it is the case that in the longer forms Aiken tended to eschew traditional ideas about structure, while in the shorter forms he generally worked obediently—and often with remarkable effectiveness—within conventional boundaries. Why is this true? One has the impression that whereas Aiken, at book length, was incapable of sustaining interest in anyone's consciousness but his own, and consequently produced uneven novels and banal poetry which reeked of self-indulgence, he could (from time to time) escape the prison of his psyche for long enough to write a short story, and thus manages to render in that genre—with a powerful objectivity, and at times a great tenderness—people very different from himself, with ideas and tastes and fixations of their own. In one story after another, Aiken successfully translates into touching human terms his abiding preoccupations with the problematic nature of consciousness and the fragility of sanity, joy, beauty, and all good things. "Proximity to madness," Aiken writes in a story called "Gehenna," "is not a privilege of genius alone; it is the privilege and natural necessity of every consciousness, from the highest to the lowest." Nor, as Aiken's stories demonstrate time and again, is proximity to poverty or ugliness or imprisonment or death accorded only to some of us; even the healthiest, happiest, richest, and most beautiful of us stands a small step away from any of these fates.

"Mr. Arcularis," for instance, presents us with an old man who, after a successful operation, is released from the hospital (or is he?), and who thereupon goes on a cruise (or does he?); the story's stunningly abrupt and haunting conclusion, in which the truth of the matter becomes suddenly clear, underlines the fearsome closeness of reality and illusion, of dream life and waking life. Almost as effective is "Impulse," which dramatizes the proximity not of reality to illusion but of order to chaos. The story's protagonist is a good-natured and well-to-do young man named Michael Lowes, who commits an act of shoplifting on an inexplicable impulse and is immediately placed under arrest, deserted by his friends, and sued for divorce by his wife—thereby learning (like Sherman McCoy in Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*) how easily a contented, law-abiding life can turn into its hellish antithesis. "This was what life was,"

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the astonished Lowes concludes once his fate has begun to take shape. "It was just as meaningless and ridiculous as this; a monstrous joke; a huge injustice." A similar motif is at the center of "A Pair of Vikings," wherein the middle-aged, small-town protagonist finds himself charmed by an exquisitely beautiful and vivacious young married couple, only twenty-two years old, both of them daredevils who regularly perform a remarkable—and exceedingly dangerous—stunt called the "Drome of Death" at a local fair. The young lady is less skilled than her husband, and it is obvious that her days are numbered; before the year is out, she dies in an accident, and when the protagonist runs into her widower some time later he finds the young man "faded and cheapened, and looking almost haggard—the beauty had gone out of him." Though he has defied death for years, only now does he really know the meaning of the word; only now does he recognize how close joy is to sorrow, beauty to ugliness, gay youth to the grave.

These are simple themes, and they are conveyed in a straightforward fashion. But the results are unusually affecting. The best of Aiken's stories have an easy, natural eloquence, an unerring sense of pace and of shape; consistently, Aiken holds back from interposing himself between the material and the reader. A story which is especially impressive for Aiken's expert handling of potentially mawkish material is "Hello, Tib." The story—barely an anecdote—could hardly be less complicated: a man waiting for his morning commuter train sees a friendly kitten gamboling toward him down the nearly empty platform. He is exhilarated by this sight, and by the pure affection he reads into it: "After all, that was what life was, wasn't it? Love, nothing but love!" Some children, however, distract the kitten, calling "Hello, Tib!", and it goes over to them instead; when they tire of it, the kitten wanders away, jumps onto the track just before the train arrives, and is killed. No one sees this happen but the man himself, who is heartbroken by his failure to rescue the kitten from its fate. "For was he not the only person here, on this early-morning platform, who had really seen and loved this little cat, and foreseen her tragic destiny?" At the heart of his pain lies the fact that no one else witnessed the kitten's death: "It was as if nothing had happened . . . . He alone knew that she was dead. He alone could have saved her." It is an extraordinarily tender story, delicate in its perceptions and wonderfully controlled; Aiken considers the nature and meaning of the communion between man and kitten without ever falling into abstraction or sentimentality, without becoming too pretentious or inward or contrived. On the contrary, the story successfully translates Aiken's thematic preoccupations into the recognizable terms of everyday life; it renders his ideas in a form that enables one not only to understand them intellectually but to experience them emotionally. Such is the case not only in "Hello, Tib" but in several of Aiken's *Collected Stories*; this is one volume of Aiken's work, long out of circulation, that richly merits reprinting.

If Aiken's fiction is so obsessed with the proximity of a pleasant, orderly life to chaos and death and madness, it is doubtless because of the single great tragic event of his life, which plunged him, at the tender age of eleven, from an affluent, reasonably happy childhood into pure horror. Early one February morning in 1901, Aiken was lying in bed in his Savannah, Georgia, home when he heard, from his parents' bedroom across the hall, two gunshots and the sound of a body falling. "And so I got out of bed," Aiken explained in an interview sixty-seven years later,

> and went through the children's bedroom, where my sister and two brothers were in their cribs, and closed the folding doors between the nursery and my father's room, and stepped over my father's body . . . he'd sprung all the way across the room from the bed, and was lying on his face with his pistol still in his hand, and went to see if my mother was still alive—and

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> of course she wasn't. Her mouth was wide open in the act of screaming . . . . So I closed the doors and got dressed. And told the children to stay in their beds and that the nurse would come up and take care of them, and went down to the maids' room in the basement, and woke them, and told them that there'd been a . . . a mishap, and that I was going for the police and would they go up and dress the children and bring them down, and keep them in the dining room. So I went to the police station which was only a block away from our house, and I told them about this.

The poet's father was William Aiken, a bright, ambitious, and well-to-do young physician with deep-seated insecurities; his uxoricide and suicide were the culmination of a long period during which he had grown increasingly anxious and paranoid, criticizing his wife, Anna, for her active social life and accusing her of infidelity. It was an event from which Aiken would never truly recover, and the family's way of dealing with the problems it engendered cannot be said to have facilitated his psychic adjustment. For one thing, the murder-suicide was never talked about in Aiken's presence, the boy never given an opportunity to come to terms with it. For another, Aiken and his siblings were split up, his sister and two brothers adopted by non-relatives and given new last names, while Aiken alone—the eldest—kept his name and was raised by relatives in Massachusetts, who sent him to an exclusive preparatory school and then to Harvard. Though as an adult he seems to have been more well adjusted than many people with less formidable traumas, Aiken did have his problems and peccadillos. Throughout his adult life (he died in 1973), he was both a heavy drinker and a compulsive adulterer; though over the decades he moved back and forth a number of times between the northeastern United States and England—the "mother country" which he identified, rather peculiarly, with his New England-born mother—he chose to spend his last years in Savannah, next door to the house in which his parents had died.

According to Aiken, the most important decision of his life—to become a writer—was made at an early age, before his parents' death. By his own account in *Ushant* (a book whose punning title—"you shan't"—would seem to be a response to the final word of *The Waste Land*, "shantih"), the young Aiken was first attracted to the idea of being a poet when he came across an epigraph in Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days*: "I am the Poet of White Horse Vale, sir, with liberal notions under my cap." "[N]o doubt," Aiken writes in *Ushant*, "this had been the first occurrence of the magic, the all-precipitating word or at any rate the occasion for the first explanation of it: poets, there were such things as poets: they wrote poems!" In the years that followed, the boy lived under "the increasingly important and relevant shadow of the Poet of White Horse Vale." Thanks to the income provided by his inheritance (and, during his first marriage, by a legacy from the father of his wife, Jessie), Aiken would be able, for most of his adult life, to devote himself full-time to the job of free-lance poet and fiction writer, and to the production of careful and intelligent literary reviews and essays for such publications as *The New Republic*, *Poetry*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. (Many of these writings were brought together in 1958 in *A Reviewer's ABC*, which was reissued ten years later under the title *Collected Criticism*.) With this freedom came the opportunity to pursue literary friendships—with, among others, Amy Lowell, John Gould Fletcher, Rupert Brooke, Harriet Monroe, and of course Eliot—on both sides of the Atlantic. But the writer's vocation also carried certain powerful and solemn associations: since the writing of verse had been one of his father's many avocations, Aiken identified more and more with his late father as his interest in writing poetry burgeoned; in addition, because the word *liberal* appeared in Hughes's epigraph—bringing to the boy's mind his maternal grandfather, an extremely liberal Unitarian minister who had gone so far as to ban the Eucharist at his church—Aiken from an early age identified poetry with liberalism and with opposition to traditional

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religious practices. Unlike his friend Eliot, Aiken would always remain unenthralled by organized religion and the Christian God, venerating instead the twin deities of poetry and modern psychology.

It is Aiken's lifelong fascination with poetry and modern psychology, and the ways in which his childhood tragedy may have led to his yoking of the one with the other and inspired his intense dedication to both, that most interest Edward Butscher in his new biography of Aiken. At its best, the book does constitute an absorbing and perceptive account of the formation of a poet's mind. Butscher's interpretation of Aiken's life and work—an interpretation which is founded on the notion of his literary career as a "quest for the means to defuse the psychoanalytic time bomb ticking away inside his locker mind"—strikes one as highly defensible (if not always felicitously phrased). The biographer accepts—and there's no reason not to accept—the self-analysis of *Blue Voyage*, in which Aiken (or, rather, his autobiographical protagonist) characterizes his own reticence, impassivity, and restless inability to "lov[e] one person or place for more than a season" as the lingering ill effects of his father's crime. Furthermore, Butscher persuasively ascribes Aiken's relentless womanizing to his complex feelings toward a mother "who had to be simultaneously possessed and degraded, saved and punished, again and again"; and—in what seems to me a just and sensitive interpretation of the facts—he attributes Aiken's powerful literary drive to the "doubts of the self's very reality" that must have followed hard upon the sudden and dramatic loss of both parents. "In the vacuum left behind by William's and Anna's violent demise," Butscher suggests, "Conrad must have feared he was about to be sucked into their wake, snuffed out before he actually existed, though language and art alone might prevent this from happening."

These observations, one senses, have a great deal of validity. But even when he appears to be on the right track, Butscher is altogether too reliant upon—if not, indeed, madly in love with—psychiatric terms. Words like *gestalt*, *prepubic*, *experiential*, and *abreact* proliferate in his pages. Seemingly implicit in his prose style is the notion that the wisdom of any insight is directly proportional to the amount of psychological lingo that can be worked into one's explanation of it. By the second page Butscher is already knee-deep in the swamps of psychologist-talk, and loving every minute of it: "Certainly the form his [William Aiken's] delusional paranoia eventually assumed, a profound distrust of his wife, had environmental roots in his father's grim puritanism and condescending distaste for the woman below his station he had married out of carnal weakness." At least once, moreover, Butscher is so wrapped up in his Psych 101 lecture that he leaves a sentence hanging in mid-air: "Sterility may ensue, budding careers be distorted or abridged, when this greenhouse environment, which tends to favor retreats into safe scholastic modes and infringes upon the tyro's freedom to make silly mistakes, to take extreme risks in an art in which self must confront its secret visages." (Almost as noisome as Butscher's taste for jargon is his proclivity for highfalutin name-dropping; in a single half-page he manages to mention Socrates, Arnold, Marcus Aurelius, Spengler, Emerson, and Lacan, with no apparent purpose other than to impress and confuse.)

Before long, in fact, it is clear to the reader of *Conrad Aiken* that the methods and vocabulary of psychoanalysis serve more as a replacement for understanding, in this book, than as a means to it. Time and again, Butscher mistakes description for explanation, operating on the hypothesis that once one has attached a Freudian or Jungian or Adlerian tag to something, one has said all that one can about it. About Aiken's supposed identification of his mother and first wife with Amy Lowell, for instance, Butscher writes: "Mother, wife, Lowell—they were recurrent forms of the ambiguous female archetype that he had to pursue and rebuff." But why, one must wonder, did

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Aiken fixate on Lowell and not someone else? This kind of analysis doesn't explain so much as it pigeonholes. The same is true of Butscher's discussion of Aiken's childhood tenderness toward helpless animals, in particular a kitten put out in the rain by a family maid. Butscher suggests that the boy's demonstrations of pity "were his sensibility's initial forays into the world beyond self, his compassion for the kitten a psychic expansion of the self-pity instilled by a father's erratic behavior and a mother's apparent defection." Yet Butscher fails to consider that another child, in the same circumstances, might have reacted by being especially cruel to animals. The question remains: What made Aiken "expand" his self-pity to include animals, rather than transfer to them his resentment and hostility toward his parents? To ignore this question is to fail to recognize what made Aiken a human being and not a case study in a psychology textbook. (It is also, of course, to analyze goodness out of existence.)

The overriding purpose of this biography is plain: Butscher wants to revive Aiken as a significant literary figure. But his argument for such a revival is based not on literary but on psychological grounds. "Aiken has to be considered a major force in the shaping of an American poetic tradition and intellectual focus," Butscher maintains, because "his awareness that Nietzsche's translation of philosophy into psychology was pivotal to an understanding of civilization and aesthetics" was "far more valid . . . than Eliot's conservative resurrection of abandoned pieties." In other words, Aiken is important because he knows that psychology matters more than philosophy or religion. It doesn't seem to cross Butscher's mind that some readers might not take this primacy for granted; consistently, he seems astonished by—and peeved at—those to whom psychology is not the queen of sciences. He ridicules the "metaphysical-minded philosophers" whose ideas about literary creativity and criticism held unfair sway (he says) until the advent of Aiken; and he endorses Aiken's sardonic put-down of "the aesthetic approach," whose partisans the poet assailed for regarding beauty as "something detached, independent, not to say absolute, something which would exist whether or not there also existed any creature to give it praise."

Butscher's understanding of a number of concepts borders on the simplistic. Implying an equation between literary modernism, political radicalism, atheism, and moral integrity, on the one hand, and between literary traditionalism, political reaction, the profession of religious faith, and moral corruption, on the other, he contrasts Aiken sharply with Eliot— an exercise from which the former, unsurprisingly, emerges as the clear victor. His argument, in sum, is that Eliot, by joining the Church of England, was "turn[ing] his back on the radical openness to experience implicit in his experimental aesthetic"; he was abandoning modernist rebellion and "returning to the fold, the privileged WASP Old Guard [that] Pound had never really abandoned." Aiken, by contrast, was a pillar of "intellectual integrity"; unable "to desert the 'liberal notions' associated in his mind with the germination and growth of his persona as the Poet of White Horse Vale, . . . he could not yield to the impulse to defy reason and wallow in a mystical revival." Needless to say, this analysis tells us less about Eliot and Aiken than about Butscher. To address only one or two of his points: first, Eliot cannot be said to have returned to the "WASP" fold with his conversion to Anglicanism, because he plainly never left it; when he wrote *The Waste Land*, after all, he was a London banker. And his embracing of religion, far from constituting a renunciation of some imagined modernist credo, seems quite consistent with the longing for faith implicit in *The Waste Land*.

His scorn for religion notwithstanding, Butscher's faith in the ability of Freud and company to explain absolutely anything smacks of the most obsessive religiosity. He appears to be constitutionally incapable of looking at life from any other perspective, of admitting the validity of any other system.

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His discussions of Aiken's work focus on its psychological aspect, and are thus inevitably repetitious and reductive; at times he behaves as if the poems are good to the degree that they lend themselves to such analysis. So absorbed is he in working out his analysis that it doesn't seem to occur to him how shocking, or funny, or both, some of his observations might sound to a lay reader:

> Attached to the sterile mask and obstinate pain was a permanent sexualization of his feelings into a satyr appetite for women as mere meat . . . including a penchant for cunnilingus—"our little peculiarities . . . canyon yodeling. Pearl diving. Muff barking."

Butscher is an eager teacher. But the most significant lesson this book teaches is that the talent of the psychoanalyst and the talent of the biographer are related but far from identical, and that Butscher would seem to have the former talent in greater proportion than he has the latter. When Butscher tells us, for example, that Aiken, soon after his first marriage, began to commit adultery, we're surprised; the newly married Aiken that he describes simply doesn't flow naturally out of the shy Harvard student we think we've come to know. Butscher thinks it's enough to show that the two different kinds of behavior are both explicable according to Aiken's background and psychological profile. But it's *not* enough, not for a biography. Butscher consistently seems not to recognize this. And the further he gets into the book the remoter Aiken seems, the less a person, the more a textbook case. To read this book, as a matter of fact, is to realize how wide a gulf there is between a human individual and the psychological terms that one may use to describe him; it is to realize that one might read such a treatise about one's closest friend and hardly recognize him. A single page of *Ushant* or of Aiken's *Selected Letters* gives one more of an idea of the kind of man Aiken was than does all of Butscher's book.

Ultimately, indeed, *Conrad Aiken* seems almost to have been an attempt to demonstrate the limitations of the psychoanalytical approach. A biography shouldn't be sensational, to be sure; but at the same time it shouldn't avoid the drama, the color, the flavor of a life. Aiken's life, judging by all the available materials, appears to have had more than its share of drama and flavor. But little of that drama or flavor has made it into Butscher's biography. There is no sense in this book of how Aiken structured his days, of how he spoke to his wife, of how he related to his children. We know everything about his neuroses, but next to nothing about his character—next to nothing, that is, about the form his neuroses took in human and literary terms. And neuroses without a human dimension are just entries in the *Merck Manual*.

Conrad Aiken looked upon life as a pilgrimage of the mind, a journey, a voyage to discovery. A resident in his childhood of two major seacoast towns—Savannah, Georgia, and New Bedford, Massachusetts—and a frequent passenger, in his adult years, on transatlantic liners between New York and London, Aiken made frequent use of the ocean voyage as a metaphor. The titles of several of his works—*The Pilgrimage of Festus*; *Blue Voyage*; *Conversation, or Pilgrims' Progress*; *The Divine Pilgrim*—reflect his preoccupation with such images. Yet Edward Butscher is unable to conceive of Aiken's life as anything other than a case study. The Conrad Aiken of this book, alas, is not a voyager on the sea of self-knowledge but an unfortunate patient-prisoner in some Bellevue of the mind. And the prime casualty of Butscher's method is, sadly, Aiken's art, which—though he discusses the poetry and fiction, and quotes from it quite frequently in the course of his psychoanalysis of the writer—does not receive much attention from him *as* art. And it is, after all, Aiken's art, more than anything else, that makes his life worth chronicling, his mind worth probing.

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Master Courbet

by Jed Perl

In a letter written to a friend in 1850, Gustave Courbet announced that "in our so very civilized society it is necessary for me to live the life of a savage. I must be free even of governments. The people have my sympathies, I must address myself to them directly." These words shed considerable light on Courbet's art—and not just because Courbet's subjects aren't always the predictable, socially acceptable ones. There's something direct and even savage (if by that we mean unconventional) in the way Courbet attacks the canvas: in the way he sponges or scrapes the paint, juxtaposes areas that are more or less realistically handled, and frames or arranges figures and objects in unexpected ways.

The risk factor in Courbet's work is, aesthetically speaking, very high. And the high-wire excitement of all those risks being taken all at once was a part—a big part—of what held us in the Courbet retrospective that was at the Brooklyn Museum earlier this winter. It was exciting to try to figure out how Courbet achieved some of his effects—how he worked the paint to get those textures of water or snow; how he orchestrated his colors to create those mysteriously beautiful flesh tones or those lowering gray-day-at-the-beach skies. And what pulled you deeper and deeper into the work was the extent to which, more times than you would imagine, the gambles panned out, and the crazy paint handling, the odd perspectives, the idiosyncratic color combinations coalesced into masterpiece-level paintings. There were many, many points in the show where Courbet seemed to be telling us, "to hell with convention." Still, the Brooklyn retrospective was one of the most totally civilized art experiences that we've had in New York in a very long time.[1] Courbet challenges—and defies—our expectations; but he does so in the name of preservation and continuation. The approach to painting is radical; but—in the sense that Courbet is trying to find new ways to attain the heights he recognizes in Rembrandt and Chardin—it's conservative, too.

First honors must go to Robert Buck, the director of the Brooklyn Museum since 1983, who set the planning for the show in motion. Organized by art historians Linda Nochlin and Sarah Faunce, this is the only major survey of Courbet's work to be seen

1 "Courbet Reconsidered" was on view at the Brooklyn Museum from November 4, 1988 to January 16, 1989. It will be at the Minneapolis Institute of Art from February 23 to April 30. The show was organized by Sarah Faunce, curator of European paintings and chair of the painting and sculpture department at the Brooklyn Museum, and Linda Nochlin, distinguished professor of art history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The catalogue, including essays by Michael Fried, Petra Chu, Douglas Edelson, and Claudette Mainzer, is published by Yale University Press (272 pages, $40).

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in this country in nearly thirty years. The Brooklyn Museum has always had great collections; it now reclaims its place as one of the major centers of art activity in New York City. Eighty-seven paintings and twelve drawings in five light-filled, gently colored galleries made for a dream-perfect experience. (True, the video show shouldn't have been stuck in the second gallery in the midst of the paintings; but after the bread and circuses that we've been put through in recent years, this hardly gave offense.) The main point was that viewing conditions were optimal. While I'm told that there were big crowds on weekends, when I went on a Friday morning there were less than fifty people in the show. This may not have been good news for IBM, the major corporate sponsor, but for the rest of us it made the difference between going to an art show and going to a freak show. (Up at the Metropolitan Museum, having a ticket to Degas on a Friday morning was like having a ticket to Armageddon.)

In Brooklyn, Courbet's paintings were hung intelligently, in thematic groupings that extended their meanings. Despite regrettable absences, there was a sense that the works had been chosen in order to illuminate one another and the career. There was no overkill—there was just enough to take in during a reasonably long visit. This was a show to put alongside the Chardin retrospective held at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1979, and the Watteau retrospective held at the National Gallery in Washington in 1984. Taken together, these shows form a triumvirate that presents French easel-scale painting in all its unbeatable glory. In French painting, paint *is* emotion, the manipulation of materials *is* the expression of feelings. Sitting on the bench in the last gallery of the Courbet retrospective, surrounded by the tragic *Self-Portrait at Ste.-Pélagie* (c. 1872), where Courbet shows himself in prison following his involvement with the Commune of 1871; by a host of nudes, including the famous study of lesbians, *The Sleepers* (1866); and by the still lifes of apples, which look backward to Chardin and forward to Cézanne—surrounded by all of this a museum-goer felt happily overwhelmed, but also happily clear in the head.

Because of the impossibility of obtaining the loan of certain major paintings that are in France, the Brooklyn show couldn't give a particularly clear picture of the days in the early 1850s when Courbet, who was in his early thirties (his dates are 1819-77), was making his most audacious assaults on conventional taste. Without the two oversized compositions of the 1850s, *The Burial at Ornans* (1850) and *The Painter's Studio* (1855), and some of the studies of peasant life, *The Stone Breakers* (1850) and *The Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair* (1850-55), Courbet was made to appear a more private personality than he obviously actually was. And yet the very absence of *The Burial at Ornans* and *The Painter's Studio* had the effect of highlighting what many of us already believed, which is that Courbet's greatness is not really based on a few large, invented figure compositions but on the high level of originality that he brought to a wide range of subjects, generally treated in easel-painting sizes.

The Burial at Ornans isn't really top-notch Courbet; the downbeat mood of the story is carried over too much into a pictorial dullness—that dark frieze of figures just goes on and on, uninteresting, uneventful. And while *The Studio* is, area by area, a succession of little masterpieces, it never really adds up to a masterful whole. (Linda Nochlin points out in her catalogue essay that *The Studio* is unfinished.) In the context of the galleries of the Louvre—where *The Burial* and *The Studio* hung before their transfer to the Musée d'Orsay—it was quite clear that Delacroix, not Courbet, was the final artist to feel at ease when working on a monumental scale. Tackling a ten- or fifteen-foot canvas in *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) and *The Massacre at Chios* (1823), Delacroix is totally in control—his arabesques and twisting rhythms expand to fill the space. Courbet's grasp of composition is more episodic and eccentric; his finest paintings

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have an effect of strangeness and surprise that's probably irreconcilable with the idea of the wall-sized masterpiece.

Courbet painted landscapes, portraits, nudes, and still lifes off and on all through his life. And from the very start of the show, where we see a wall of youthful self-portraits, to the very end, where we see the paintings of heaps of apples, he manages to give each subject a unique, freestanding value. Even when he's working on various versions of a single motif—as in the seascapes—he avoids formulaic solutions. He certainly never expects the kinds of techniques or structural ideas that worked in a seascape to work in a landscape or a still life. He puts us in touch with the strangely awkward beauty of the landscape where he grew up—the Jura plateau in eastern France, through which the Doubs River winds, creating dramatic gorges and waterfalls. And he brings an equally deep but different sensitivity to the misty immensities of the Atlantic Ocean, which he visited as a tourist. Everywhere, one feels his supreme sense of scale, how the relation of tiny boats to enormous cloud formations in the seascapes is every bit as exact and poetically right as the relation of trees, towns, and rock formations in the paintings of the Jura plateau. Courbet responds as deeply to the frozen loneliness of an animal foraging in winter—in *The Snowy Landscape with Boar* (1866-67)—as he does to the little fishing boats at the Cliffs of Etretat, just after a storm.

In a sense, Courbet is a promiscuous artist: he likes to imagine himself in the landscape of childhood, or in the hostile world of winter, or at the seashore. And this promiscuity jibes with the largeness of the personality that we know from the history books—of the man who got involved and messed up in political developments around the Commune, and who made dramatic gestures, as when, in anger over the rejection of some paintings from the Universal Exposition of 1855, he opened his own pavilion. But what the public histories don't really tell us is the extent to which the man could be authentic in different situations. That's what the paintings tell us. The bravado of the paint-handling resolves into a perfect transparency of expression.

Courbet's sympathy shines forth in his portraits. Take, for example, the portraits of two brothers, the Nodlers, that Courbet painted in 1865. Courbet met the Nodlers—who were, apparently, in their twenties—at Trouville, a seaside resort on the English Channel where he'd gone in search of clients. These two young men are paragons of self-assurance—and of Second Empire elegance—and Courbet zeros in on their similarities and their dissimilarities. (It's the sort of union of social and psychological insight one expects from Ingres.) The older brother is a bit restrained and conservative-looking, what with his neat, shortish hair and quiet brown clothes. Courbet paints him in front of the ocean; and the pale tones of the beach, water, and sky give a moderate, pleasingly serene mood to the portrait of a man who seems to fit easily into the wide world. The younger brother, no less confident, is a flashier type—as Rae Becker says in the exhibition catalogue, he's a "young bourgeois with romantic yearnings." Courbet sets his more dramatic get-up (a big red tie, a cape over one shoulder) against a deep green, this-could-be-anywhere backdrop. With a bold look in his dark eyes and his carefully unruly hair falling around his face, this younger M. Nodler looks like our contemporary—a guy standing at the espresso bar in the new Dean & DeLuca on the corner of Broadway and Prince. Courbet shows these brothers as they are—but what a presentation it is, in which the little details all build and add up to two discrete personalities. We see these men in their social milieu, and we understand the extent to which their individuality is defined by that milieu. Courbet has no axe to grind; he just wants to tell us who the Nodlers are.

Readers who haven't yet heard about the catalogue of the Courbet show will want to know that a good deal of controversy has been kicked off by a pair of essays by Linda Nochlin and Michael Fried that focus on

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Courbet's relations with women. This is the first time that the kind of gender studies now popular in the universities has dominated the text of a major museum catalogue; and a lot of people in art-historical and art-critical circles—including many feminists—are dismayed, and have been throwing the catalogue down with cries of "Enough!"

In a long study of *The Painter's Studio*, Nochlin opposes what she calls "the 'normal' voice and position of the art historian" with what she calls "reading as a woman," and then arrives at a sort of fantasy version of *The Studio*, in which the nineteenth-century animal painter Rosa Bonheur has taken Courbet's place and "Courbet, nude, or rather partly draped, stands modestly behind her." Michael Fried follows this with an essay called "Courbet's 'Femininity.'" Courbet, Fried argues, didn't exactly look on women as strange, alien creatures; in fact, Courbet established a sympathetic complicity with women—thus his "feminine" side. Both Nochlin and Fried are at the top of their profession, and their essays are by no means lightweight stuff. When Nochlin marshals texts from Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, and contemporary postmodern thought, she does it with the kind of intellectual panache that earns people the top professorships at the top universities. Nochlin and Fried are capable of getting excited about paintings—both have written distinguished criticism of contemporary art; they describe with an immediacy that can't be faked. Some of Nochlin's catalogue entries—particularly the one for *Dressing the Dead Girl* (c. 1850)—are lucid and elegant; she tells us everything that we want to know. And so when she comes out with something as banal as the statement that Courbet in *The Painter's Studio* is "unequivocally male, unambiguously active," while the model standing behind him is "equally unambiguously female, and passive," you wonder what's gotten into her. Likewise, when Fried goes on and on about Courbet's sympathy for women, you wonder why he doesn't discuss Courbet's sympathy for his other subjects—for trees, wild animals, and men, too. In both of these essays there's a point where the intellectual playfulness is interesting, engaging; and then there's a point beyond that, where the postmodern theories and the scholarly flourishes only make a muddle. By dividing her essay into virtually freestanding parts, Nochlin acknowledges that her ideas don't really coalesce. She won't—and, I expect, can't—give up her passion for Courbet's art. And yet, when she looks back at the nineteenth century, she's horrified by how circumscribed a role women had in social and intellectual life, by how men lorded it over them. She's right to love Courbet; and she's also right not to love the situation of women in the nineteenth century. It's a past many women understandably want no part of. (It's difficult to imagine any woman artist feeling nostalgic for the nineteenth century.) But what has this got to do with Courbet?

What is sure is that we have Courbet's paintings, and that the paintings of women—of women in various stages of undress, and of women asleep—speak to us with as much urgency as any works of the nineteenth century. (Nochlin wouldn't be writing about them if they didn't speak to her.) Courbet's paintings of women disturb us in ways and to degrees unknown in Ingres, Delacroix, Corot, and Renoir. Even Manet, who shared Courbet's power to create imagery that shocked his contemporaries, can't shock us anymore, because he lacks Courbet's imaginative gifts, Courbet's ability to realize his ideas. There's always something brilliantly, unforgettably awry in Courbet's paintings of women. In *The Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine* (1856-57) it's the gesture of the woman in the foreground—the arms circling the head, the hands half open, unused, helpless—which makes her look like an awkward heap, a broken doll. In *The Sleepers* what holds us is the harshly clinical yet beautiful whiteness, and the sharp-focus attention that Courbet gives to every twist and turn of flesh. And then there are all of those cascades of women's hair—red, black, blonde—which comprise a fetishist's capriccios, each dif-

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ferent, each brilliant. And then there is the painting that has never been shown in public before, Courbet's close-up view between a woman's legs, *The Origin of the World* (1866). It's a shocker; but it's also a painting, a *real* painting. Even here, we feel that Courbet wants to take the subject seriously, to compose the elements. Courbet's paintings of women aren't acts perpetrated upon women; they're informed by all the freedom from open and shut motivations that the artistic endeavor implies. And the more dangerous and difficult the subject, the higher Courbet seems to go. *The Sleepers* is among the most eerily decadent images in Western art; but the harmonies of whites and tans and pale mauves, set against the dreamlike Prussian blue of the wallpaper, purify the decadence by giving an exact value to untoward tastes.

The title of the Brooklyn show was "Courbet Reconsidered"—as if appreciating Courbet were a two-step process, consideration and reconsideration. Some of the reconsideration in the catalogue was outstanding, especially Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu's essay on the landscapes, in which Courbet's fascination with the Jura plateau is revealed in all its richness of aspects—scientific, historic, sentimental. And while one may reject Nochlin's catalogue essay, it's important to remember that she did, together with Sarah Faunce, organize a great show. Still, the direction of Nochlin's thinking these days—and she is a bellwether of where art history is going—is toward increasingly forced forms of reconsideration. Thinking about Courbet is really a perpetual and unpredictable process, one that began when the artist first put brush to canvas, and will end only when there's no one left to look at the paintings. These paintings probably have more meanings than we'll ever be able to unlock. Just when we think we've grasped the one essential meaning, Courbet pulls the rug out from under us, and we're swept up, higher and higher, to a place beyond meaning.

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Poems *by Paul Lake, Robert Phillips, Sandra McPherson, Irving Feldman & Leslie Norris*

Pieces

The queen moves with unbounded liberty.
Slant-eyed, a bishop offers up a prayer.
A horse-faced gallant full of chivalry
Enters the family trade, an officer.

A rook, high as a silo, lets fire fall,
Then ends its run behind a remnant pawn.
The king strolls past his garden's rose-grown wall
To issue statements from the castle lawn.

Only the pawns, bald-domed as army ants,
Urged to the common good by stripes and prayers,
Regard the board, cursed with their consciousness
Of all the horror of those empty squares.

—*Paul Lake*

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The black swan at Schloss Benrath

cries for days in rampant display,
lamenting the loss of his mate

who strangled on a lead weight
affixed to abandoned fishing line,

circles the mirror lake, searching
for one his constant heart dreads

he will not find. Pieces of bread
are tossed by villagers come to observe.

For weeks he will not eat,
filled only with his trumpeting.

Signs are posted banning anything
that would further trash the waters,

to no avail. Morning proclaims
a piece of junk floating there,

black, unswanlike, and unaware.

—Robert Phillips

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Gulls in frost

Like quartz grazing on an herb of boulangerite:
as if they will never melt or separate.

Sainted nature—
this stiff new pretty physics
possessing the grass.

Both stillnesses, both fixations have feathers;
the gulls can watch
the frost's grow.

At this hour, only the perdition
of a rising workforce
fires up around their haven.

But when the gulls begin to pace,
each of these absolute regions of reward

is pressed into evaporation,
releasing us to the flexibility
that bends among colors,

the wet paint of what we'll brush against
and be.
Their wings break

the gray crystal immobility—
bird-elbows and grass-blade-knees.
Expect

they'll jump and spring; do not expect
the sinless exquisite
will ever be ready

for the thaw permitted it.

—*Sandra McPherson*

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The runners

Here or there hundreds of them, phantom-like,
bobbing in place at street corners, then
lifting their knees suddenly and leaping
into the densest, loudest traffic
(of briefest trajectories, of shortest views),
in transit yet at ease, breathing, loping,
like bearers of distance and pure directions,
darting half naked out of nowhere and
where, where in the world are they running to?
swift and solitary, silent beings
who, should you now step into the path,
have dodged away, or, if you raise a hand
to stay them or speak, immediately
are gone: who are these runners who create
in their gliding such fine, singular spaces
among the street's vociferous jargons?
—as if each one were a still, wordless message
or question one would answer if one could grasp it,
this one, that one, sliding past, going away,
while you stand there, your hand raised to no purpose,
your hidden heart rejoicing that the quick heel
won't soon, won't ever, be overtaken,
although you, as you have longed to, suddenly
disburden yourself and follow follow.

—*Irving Feldman*

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Decoys

1.
They work in garages,
in cold sheds behind houses,
in basements under harsh lights,
the men who make decoys.

At desks, or behind
the wheels of trucks,
all day their hands have ached
for this. They eat slowly,

savor their last cups,
and in a dream, breath
masked from the snuff of wood,
go now to set the false birds

free. Their saws are warm
and humming, their burrs,
their files, rotate
at an electric wish.

Everywhere is a fur
of dust; of walnut,
of white oak, logged forests
dried for this making.

With the flat of their palms
they measure the neck's right curve
and set with an eye
an angle to the beak.

Such birds must look comfortable.
The glass eyes are inserted
in a parody of safety,
neither wild nor mad.

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Now it is the caress
of repetitive fine abrasives
transforms to feathers
the annual rings, to a persuasion of down.

The paint is brilliant,
acrylic, quick-drying,
more accurate than nature.
It is touched with shadows.

There are seven shades of black.

2.
Such perfect creatures keep
at the edges of your mind.
They will not breed, are mere
flawless images. Let them bob
in the ebb of your knowledge.

Soon you will forget them.
White-fronts out of Spitzbergen,
flying through sleet cold enough
to freeze the soft tongues in their mouths,
would find your decoys faulty:

yet you can tease them down
with a sheet of newsprint
torn like a heart, and weighed
with a clod of grass. Set it
blunt end to the wind, and watch

the great birds from the sea
come flighting in. But the best,
the most killing of all deceits,
is a dead bird. Keep the few unbroken
of your last deaths. Place them

pale breasts to the sky, heads
to the wind; and let them lie
on the cold saltings,
on scatterings of snow no whiter
than the fans of their tails.

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Do this alone, on a night
no other man would walk in,
wary of ice in your gun-barrels,
the tide shifting, the light
blown all ways of the compass.

You must be still as a dead bird.

3.
The gun has its knowledge, its action
fast as instinct. Once, on an empty night,
our sacks still folded, a heavy dew
an hour away with the dawn,
my gun swung in its own smooth curve,
pulling my hands to fire.
There was not a pause.

And the mallard fell out of darkness
in its weight, its feathered heaviness.
It was a green drake. I took it from the ditch
as its eye faded. By god, said my friend, dancing,
you scraped it off the face of the moon.
I brushed the wing that had pushed night from under it.

It was the gun had known.

4.
There are men, they are born with it,
who have the gift of calling.

They live in cottages on the saltings,
or if in villages, move quietly by night.

Nothing changes in their country but they know it;
the angle of a gate, a dropped branch, shifts in the wind.

For them the sky fills with wildfowl. The lanes of flight
clamor for them, for them sanderling

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and redshank patter at the tide's withdrawing runnels.
They turn, in quiet beds, at a flake of snow.

When they call, when they squat in a hide
or hide in a thick of bush,

they blow through cupped hands
for a meeting of animals and birds,

call again and again, the note rising,
an elegy for vulnerable creatures,

the hare, the partridge, runners and low fliers.
And for the waterbirds, for rafts of teal,

for pied shelduck, for skeins of geese,
brent goose, snow goose, pinkfoot, Canada,

the little bean goose, hardy in the air,
the royal swan, the whooper,

all humble on land, on their pliable webs.
Let the men put away rapacious lead, let them be still.

The birds have given them the wide cold sky,
they have given them dreams of innocence.

They have given them voices.

—*Leslie Norris*

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Art

The "Mephistopheles" of sculpture: Medardo Rosso today

by Eric Gibson

Between art-history graduate students looking for dissertation topics and the marketplace looking for more things to sell, it is hard to believe there's a modern artist we don't know down to the last detail. But there is, and it is Medardo Rosso, the Italian sculptor who was born in 1858 and died a few months short of his seventieth birthday, in 1928. Today Rosso is hardly known to us. His work is almost never exhibited in this country. And so little has been published about him outside his native country that the late Margaret Scolari Barr's monograph, now twenty-five years old and long out of print, remains the standard text in English.

Yet the few who do know him, sculptors mostly, as well as art historians and critics, feel passionately about him. No wonder! His work is utterly bewitching. Unlike most sculpture, where palpably three-dimensional form is set out in real space, Rosso's work is pictorial. His deeply human images of children sleeping, old men reading, and women laughing are intended to convey the illusion of form wrought from nothing more substantial than light and air. Often called "Impressionist sculpture," his work seems to belong to the shadows as much as to the realm of tangible objects.

For Rosso's admirers, 1988 was a banner year, there having been opportunities to reacquaint oneself with his work on all of two occasions. The first came in the spring when an original wax, Rosso's favorite medium, turned up in the Andy Warhol Collection at Sotheby's. Then, in the fall, the Kent Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street in New York put up roughly a dozen examples of Rosso's work in wax and bronze.[1]

Though the Kent show included a good representation of the artist's output, as well as some important pieces, among them the late *Ecce Puer* (1906) and two versions of *The Jewish Boy* (1892-3), it wasn't a complete retrospective. *Conversation in the Garden* (1893), Rosso's only surviving figure group, wasn't included, nor was *The Bookmaker* (1894) or *Lady with a Veil* (1893). But since at this point seeing any Rossos together is an event, it seems churlish to point out shortcomings. Besides, some exhibitions don't need to be retrospectives to be informative, and that was the case here. Thanks to a skilled installation and some deft juxtapositions, the viewer came away with an enhanced appreciation of Rosso's skills and importance as a sculptor.

It has been Rosso's fate to wind up the "second man" of early modern sculpture, an artist likely to come to mind only after the

1 "Medardo Rosso: Impressions in Wax and Bronze" was on view at the Kent Gallery from November 8 to December 14. An illustrated catalogue with an essay by Rosso authority Luciano Caramel was available for $25. The show is currently on view through March at the Kamakura Gallery, Tokyo, whence it travels to London for a showing at the David Grob Gallery from May until June.

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names of Rodin, Degas, and Brancusi have already surfaced. In this, he has been partly the victim of his own aesthetic ideals. His output was not enormous: it comprised less than three dozen original works, some of them now lost (although many of those surviving do exist in multiple editions). His sculpture was so dependent on precise lighting for its effects that during his lifetime Rosso would only allow the publication of photographs of his work if he had taken them himself. And he took great trouble over installing his own exhibitions—with good reason. When his works are poorly installed—like the two overly lighted pieces at the Museum of Modern Art—they lose their special character. They are reduced to the level of ordinary, freely modeled sculpture, works which at best appear to be preparatory sketches for a larger project.

The description of Rosso's work as "Impressionist sculpture," while technically correct, does Rosso a disservice. It sounds both limited and slightly off the point as artistic ambitions go; it conjures up a sculptor who is out to prove his art the equal of any by taking up what is surely the ultimate challenge of making three-dimensional form out of an Impressionist aesthetic of formlessness. But Rosso was no ordinary modeler. There's a famous passage in Rilke's book on Rodin in which the author compares the head of the *Balzac* to a ping-pong ball dancing on a jet of water. The image—with its associations of precariousness, contingency, and deftness—makes an apt metaphor for the whole of Rosso's art. For it is an art of exquisite balances, most visibly between hand and eye.

Rosso practiced an extraordinary sleight of hand: he took solid matter and made it seem evanescent, fleeting. Bringing this off called for a kind of dual vision on Rosso's part. He had to look at the material under his fingers and beyond it, shaping every surface with an eye both to the subject in nature and to his ability to bring the image to life under the impact of light. His success at doing so prompted the turn-of-the-century art critic Julius Meier-Graefe to dub him the "Mephistopheles" of sculpture. Looking at Rosso's work today, one can think of no more apt characterization.

Rosso's first outings, *Garabaldino* (1882), *Le Gavroche* (1882), and *Il Vecchio* (1883)—the earliest works on view at the Kent gallery—show the artist in an ambitious, self-critical mood. All three are portrait heads modeled in a realist manner, with a lively play of light and shade across their surfaces. Rosso, however, clearly realizes he's not achieving the effects he wants, because from one to the other he makes adjustments which will intensify that play of light. In *Le Gavroche*, the serious mien of *Garabaldino* has become a radiant smile, a device which animates the work's facial geography in the manner of archaic Greek sculpture, and adds character. In *Il Vecchio*, an octogenarian's wrinkles are added to the smile. And in all three works, there's a growing freedom of handling. In fact, there's so much going on that *Il Vecchio* is almost too busy to read clearly. In general, though, Rosso's problem is that his lively play of light and shade is at odds with his aim of forming a likeness. The giveaway is that we find ourselves constantly trying to look *through* the lights and darks to read the sitters' features and determine who they are.

Then, with *The Sacristan* (1883), Rosso's first mature work, everything falls into place. Coming only a few months after the problematic *Il Vecchio*, *The Sacristan* shows the head of a middle-aged man looking down and off to the side, his chin resting on his chest. What's new is the reversal of priorities. In contrast to the earlier pieces, almost everything we know about the figure is told to us in terms of light and shade. The Impressionist vision has triumphed over straightforward realism.

Two developments helped Rosso achieve his goal here. The first was his abandonment of sculpture in the round and his imposition upon the viewer of a single viewpoint, a single angle from which the sculpture works. The second was his accidental discovery of wax as the ideal material for his aesthetic. Plaster stops and flattens light; bronze

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reflects it. Wax absorbs, retains, and softens it, blurring surfaces and creating the softer play of light and shade that was ideal for Rosso's atmospheric illusionism.

But harnessing light and shadow in this way entailed more than these two relatively simple adjustments. Rosso also invented a new type of chiaroscuro modeling that was at odds with the ages-old approach, in which clearly defined light-dark contrasts articulated form in the round, visibly setting it off from surrounding space. In traditional technique, light and shadow modeled form by cleaving to the sculpture's surface, to which they were anchored by the sharp outer edges, or contours, of the form or plane. But in *The Sacristan*, Rosso sacrifices naturalism and records appearance in terms of the medium—in this case, clay. He's making something like a *bozzetto*, the sculptor's preliminary sketch, but as an end in itself, and it's easy to see why. The broken planes that result from this sort of free handling make clear contours impossible. Shadow is set in motion across the surface to play a role in the articulation of form second only to that of the artist's fingers. Here it lightly brushes a surface, there it pools, boring into the sculptural mass like acid, making an eye, a mouth, or the space between forelock and cranium. Shadow even gives expression: the dark eye sockets, for instance, convey a mood of deep introspection.

In sufficient concentrations, shadow also serves an optical function, dissolving into a kind of optical space. This is what happens in *The Laughing Woman*, a heavily shadowed woman's head. To the eye used to apprehending sculpture in terms of its illumined surfaces, the piece is frustratingly elusive, at least at first. But in another instant it becomes a face emerging from a shadowy atmosphere. The work comes to life entirely in the viewer's eye.

With Rosso's revolutionary shift in the character and purposes of chiaroscuro modeling it becomes possible to speak of color in sculpture. Opticality is reinforced by tonality, a graded range of lights and darks. In the descriptive manner of a draughtsman or photographer, Rosso adjusts his modeling to ensure a complete run from highlights through midtones to darks. Indeed, sometimes his sculptures seem more drawn than modeled. In *Sick Man in the Hospital* (1889), a smallish sculpture of an elderly man in a chair with a book, the smallest smudge of dark shadow is all we get for an eye, while below it an equally minute half-tone indicates the sag of the flesh under the cheekbone. Infinitely subtle touches, yet they tell us everything we need to know about one man's physical appearance and the pathos of old age.

Rosso's sculptures become even more "drawn" through the Nineties in works such as *Sick Child* (1889), *The Jewish Boy* (ca. 1892-3), and *Ecce Puer*. Rosso purifies his surfaces, gradually eliminating the *bozzetto* handling in favor of smooth surfaces that approach pure volume. Only the slightest touches of shadow can be seen around the eyes and mouth; these give articulation and identity to the mass. In one work, not included at Kent, he goes too far. *Madame X* (1896) is a head almost Cycladic in its simplicity and planarity, a work extremely radical for its day. Features are all but imperceptible, making it more a Brancusi object-sculpture than one of Rosso's characteristic illusions. But the other works from this period form the sculptural mirages that are the pinnacle of his art.

It may have been an injustice that Rosso was relegated to the second tier of sculptors, but it is easy to see how it happened, for there was much in his art that was incompatible with the modernist impulse. At a time when sculpture was becoming increasingly physical and tactile, Rosso's addressed itself exclusively to the eye. What is more, it preserved the characteristic single viewpoint of nineteenth-century sculpture against which Rodin and Degas were reacting by insisting on a 360-degree reading of their work. Rosso also retained the idea of narrative, which the modernists were eager to jettison, and he continued to make the face the chief carrier of emotional expression at the very moment

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when Rodin and Degas were inventing a language of bodily gesture.

Yet, like Rodin, Rosso was conservative and modern at the same time. If he retained narrative, he also redefined it. Realism replaced melodrama, and children became children rather than accessories in allegorical compositions. Descriptive detail was gradually eliminated, and pose and facial expression were adjusted to concentrate the incident into a single moment, caught at its peak and implying both its past build-up and future diminution (e.g., *The Laughing Woman*). Or action became continuous and drawn out, such as when a child is shown looking through a curtain (*Ecce Puer*) or a man reading (*Sick Man in the Hospital*). In both cases, expository time is held in a permanent state of suspension, the sort of thing Degas did in his sculptures of horses.

Rosso's attitude to sculptural space was also modern, in its way. His aim to fuse form with ambient light and atmosphere placed him squarely at the center of one of the central sculptural concerns of his day—namely, the desire to give space a primacy it had hitherto lacked. Rodin's floating, leaping, diving figures charged the space outside themselves—something that had never been done before. And Degas, in his sculptures of ballerinas, carefully calculated the gaps between limb and limb, between limb and torso, and made his figures strike unprecedented poses, all with an eye to making space a more important part of his art.

Rosso's drive to equalize form and space looks forward to similar innovations in the art of Picasso, the Cubists, and the Constructivists. Picasso's 1912 *Guitar*, radical though it was in certain ways, tackles the same problems that Rosso had confronted earlier, but from a different angle. Rosso achieved his goal by creating the illusion that solid form is as soft, ephemeral, and evanescent as light and air; Picasso by making the viewer believe that the ambient air and exposed interior spaces of his guitar had different densities. Naum Gabo, too, seems an heir to Rosso. In his *Linear Constructions* of the Forties light irradiates along a web of nylon filament strung over a Lucite frame, endowing the central void with a miraculous quiddity. Like Rosso, Gabo is able to endow space itself with the tangibility of solid matter.

Ironically, it was the Futurists, Rosso's own countrymen and most enthusiastic public admirers, who completely missed the point of what he was doing. Boccioni, in his 1912 *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture*, praised Rosso for "point[ing] toward the liberation of space," although he criticized him for the "impressionistic niceties" of his work. He went on to announce a similar ambition to Rosso's, proclaiming that "the environment must be part of the plastic block." Nevertheless, Boccioni's own 1912 *Fusion of Head and Window* was a rather comic piece (it no longer exists). Photographs show a cruciform window mullion projecting from a head, and what looks to be urban details, like houses. It is a literal, academic transcription of Rosso's aesthetic, and as such a failure. Boccioni only came close to realizing his aims in *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) and *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1912), works which rely for their success more on Cubist fragmentation than on Rosso's perceptual illusionism.

Rosso may have paid a price for pursuing one idea throughout an entire career. He clearly lacked the wide-ranging ambition of a Rodin. But surely it can be no marginal artist who was capable of influencing Degas, Brancusi, and Rodin himself, three giants of modern sculpture. Yet this is what Rosso did.

It is generally accepted that the pose of the upright, leaning figure in Rosso's *Conversation in the Garden* furnished Rodin with a way out of the impasse he confronted in his *Balzac* commission. Rodin borrowed both the figure's pose and Rosso's chiaroscuro modeling. Degas borrowed from Rosso's *Large Laughing Woman* (1891) for two or three portraits; in particular, he used the rough handling of the clay, the uncharacteristic blockiness of the head mass, and, most

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interestingly, the device of obscuring one eye. Rosso's *Sick Man in the Hospital*, in which an elderly man is shown seated and holding a book, inspired Degas's sculptures of seated bathers.

The precise nature of Rosso's influence on Brancusi is impossible to establish. Only a few years after his arrival in Paris, Brancusi invited the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz to look at the Rossos in the Musée Luxembourg. (*Ecce Puer* and *Lady with a Veil* had been acquired by the French state in 1907.) Brancusi, of course, was making sculptures of infants and children almost from the beginning of his career; if this theme was not his own idea, it is as likely to have come from Jules Dalou, whose 1878 *Head of Sleeping Infant* was exhibited at the Petit Palais in 1905, as from Rosso.[2] Two other aspects of Rosso's work are apt to have influenced Brancusi: the way the smoothing of planes and subordination of detail in Rosso's later work pushed the sculptural mass toward pure volume; and the way his figures withdraw from the world by means of eyes barely depicted or closed, or by an averted gaze.

We are used to hearing that the history of modern sculpture is one of the increasing literalization of the work of art, a gradual progression from a late nineteenth-century illusionism to the unabashed "thereness" of a Donald Judd box. But that version of modern art history ignores another important tradition—namely, the prevalence of sculpture which addresses itself solely to the eye.

It is in this tradition that we can find Rosso's legacy: in the highly polished, dematerialized surfaces of Brancusi's sculpture, and in Giacometti's postwar figurative work, which seems more mirage than sculpture. In recent times, a veritable flood of such sculpture has appeared, from which the work of three artists bears mentioning. There is the late Christopher Wilmarth's 1970s series *Nine Clearings for a Standing Man*, human-scale reliefs in which steel, translucent glass, and natural light are combined to elicit an experience more pictorial than sculptural. There is James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, an extinct volcano in Arizona where a viewer looking skyward from inside a crater has his experience of celestial space shaped by the carefully sculpted crater rim and by changing atmospheric conditions. And there is, odd as it may seem, Donald Judd's entire oeuvre. This apostle of literalism offers the viewer purely optical rewards in his coldly austere sculptures and in his use of colored plexiglass to trap and diffuse light.

Rosso, though perhaps not the father of these later developments, is certainly their precursor. Thus, whether in his own time or ours, he is far from being the "second man" of modern sculpture. Rather, he is profoundly relevant to sculpture's past, and to its present.

2 The Dalou-Brancusi connection is discussed in a catalogue entry on Dalou written by John M. Hunisack in H. W. Janson and Peter Fusco's *The Romantics to Rodin: French Nineteenth-Century Sculpture From North American Collections* (Braziller, 1980).

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Painting like the Old Masters: Odd Nerdrum

by Kenworth W. Moffett

The Norwegian figurative painter Odd Nerdrum does big, dark, brooding narrative scenes that look like they were painted in the seventeenth century. He has been exhibiting in New York since the early Eighties. His last large New York show was held jointly at the Martina Hamilton Gallery and the Germans van Eck Gallery in 1986. For all its faults and lapses, that exhibition proved to me that Nerdrum is an enormous talent. If the show as a whole was very uneven, some of the individual pictures were brilliant.

This year's show, held in November at the Edward Thorp Gallery, represented a huge step forward. It was a far more powerful, consistent, and original statement. Nerdrum's darks have become richer, more evocative; the skin tones lighter, more lustrous. His realism is now broader but also more refined, more finished.

Nerdrum lives in Oslo and is forty-three years old. He studied at the Düsseldorf Academy under the famous neo-Dadaist and political activist Josef Beuys. But Nerdrum's art today couldn't be more different from Beuys's, for Nerdrum paints like the Old Masters. He works directly from models whom he poses wearing special costumes. Grinding his own pigments, he applies many glazes to get rich, deep, dark depths. He only completes seven or eight pictures a year. Because of their theatrical lighting, these pictures remind you most of Caravaggio and Rembrandt. Figures emerge from mysterious shadows into bright light or are silhouetted against a bright light. Especially Rembrandtesque is the mood and the warmth of the large areas of shadow.

Nerdrum paints beautifully. He is a magician turning paint into light. But he is not a pure painter. He is a romantic storyteller who believes in his tale, or at least knows how to make it convincing. He creates a complete and separate reality. In this he is an extreme traditionalist and the only important contemporary painter whom it makes sense to call a "postmodernist." He gives us not an object or a surface but a complete situation. We are asked to pay attention not to the reality of the picture but to the reality of the scene. The picture doesn't come out at us but we travel back into it. Even the paintings of an artist like El Greco seem modern compared to Nerdrum's.

What is this story that Nerdrum tells with such genuine feeling? As it has evolved over the past five years, Nerdrum's subjects could be said to fall into three groups. First of all there are the mythic pictures. Nude figures are isolated in barren landscapes. A violent act is committed. There are images of blindness and transfiguration through light.

In a second, larger group of pictures, figures clad in leather and pelts and armed with simple bows and arrows and carbine rifles perform fertility rituals, sleep, or keep watch. Their expressions are stoic and thoughtful. Many of these figures are wearing leather skull caps, which gives a very medieval feeling to the scenes. Again the

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setting is a desolate northern landscape (inspired by the volcanic terrain of Iceland, which Nerdrum has visited).

Some writers have seen Nerdrum's second group of pictures as depicting survival after the Bomb. Certainly he is saying something here about the rebirth of civilization and the resilience of man's spirit. Man is not brutalized by his primitive situation but retains his sensitivity, imagination, and inwardness.

The most powerful picture in this year's show, *The Seed Protectors*, is 112 inches by 140 inches, and of this second type. Three "elders" are seated in a dark landscape before a glowing sky. In front of them are two kneeling figures seen from behind. The grouping is symmetrical. The three "elders" are gravely serious and each is deeply involved with his own thoughts. The rich chiaroscuro adds to the sense of mystery and tragedy.

An example of the third group of pictures is *The Singers*. Three identical, gaunt, hermaphroditic figures dressed in leather sing and dance on their toes. The effect is disturbing, bizarre, and dreamlike. The same can be said of *The Twins*, which shows two identical swaddled children set side by side, or *Solemorte*, which shows a weird fusing of the face of a Narcissus-like figure with its reflected image. In these three pictures Nerdrum shows a Surrealist side which gives a modern twist to his predominantly romantic imagery.

This imagery reminds me most of the work of late nineteenth-century German romantic-symbolist painters like Arnold Böcklin, Hans von Marées, and Frans Stuck. They too devised their own eclectic, quasi-religious, neo-pagan subject matter. They too borrowed heavily from the Old Masters and especially Rembrandt. But none of these late nineteenth-century German painters was artistically successful. By now their pictures have become period pieces full of dead passages and false notes.

Nerdrum too can be sentimental and stagy in a nineteenth-century way. This was true of several large, Millet-like canvases in his 1986 exhibition. With his recent show, though, Nerdrum has gained complete control of physiognomic expression and this, together with his always extraordinary handling of paint, allows him to succeed where the late German romantics failed. But it does seem like an amazing historical irony that this kind of painting would find its full realization only in our time.

All this is not to say that Nerdrum's art is a complete anachronism. As I've mentioned, his story has an especially contemporary slant and sometimes a Surrealist twist. Also, the expressive clouds that occasionally appear in Nerdrum's skies come from the paintings of Munch. Certain of Nerdrum's images recall blue-period Picasso. But these are only modern touches, like the carbine rifles that the figures carry. Basically, Nerdrum is a traditionalist.

Is Nerdrum academic? No more than were Rodin or Maillol. They too were great modern practitioners of traditional styles. They too fill up older forms with new life and feeling. Maybe we are more used to this approach in sculpture. But there is at least one other example in painting. I'm thinking of the Uruguayan painter Horatio Torres. Torres died in 1976, but in the last four or five years before his death he painted a wonderful group of pictures of female nudes in the tradition of Titian and Rubens.

None of the other traditional realist painters I can think of comes up to the level of the Old Masters they imitate. Major painters who work in traditional styles are few and far between. Almost all of the best painters since the middle of the nineteenth century have been modernists. And not since Géricault has an important painter done monumental history painting in a dark, realistic style the way Nerdrum does today.

The most remarkable thing about Nerdrum, then, is that he exists at all, that someone can still paint like the Old Masters and on their level. In the present historical context, Nerdrum conveys not the shock of the new but the shock of the unexpected. He shows that genius is beyond time and can get away with anything.

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Dance

The inside dope on Ballet Theatre

by Eva Resnikova

On a recent broadcast of "Jeopardy!"—the immensely popular game show responsible for Dan Rather's new time slot—the category was dancing, and the answer was: "He is responsible for more than half of the repertory of New York City Ballet." The first contestant to reach his buzzer guessed, "Who is Mikhail Baryshnikov?"

Millions of Americans know the name of Mikhail Baryshnikov and that he has something to do with ballet, even if they're a bit hazy on the exact connection. Their knowledge of him is as a celebrity: an actor in movies and television specials; a former boyfriend of Jessica Lange; a major player in Gelsey Kirkland's *Dancing on My Grave.* Next summer, millions more will know Misha the perfume ($175 an ounce), which the premier danseur will personally tout as part of its $4 million promotional campaign.

The publishers of John Fraser's *Private View: Inside Baryshnikov's American Ballet Theatre* [1] are probably hoping that the book will have an appeal that goes beyond its built-in audience of ballet enthusiasts to the more vaguely informed—those not quite sure about the difference between Balanchine and Baryshnikov—who were responsible for turning Kirkland's book into a best-seller. But if these readers are looking for personal revelations from Baryshnikov comparable to Kirkland's, they will be disappointed. The title is a bit of a teaser, but the subtitle promises only to give us a look into the workings of the company that Baryshnikov has headed since 1980, not into the workings of its artistic director's mind or soul.

Still, one would expect a private view into Baryshnikov's American Ballet Theatre to involve a discussion of his artistic credo, specifically as it relates to the direction in which he has chosen to lead one of the two most important ballet companies in America. This we can only glean from snippets scattered here and there throughout the narrative—with a large dose of caveat lector, owing to grave questions concerning the reliability of the amanuensis and cicerone.

John Fraser is a Canadian journalist who was dance critic of the Toronto *Globe and Mail* at the time of Baryshnikov's defection in that city in 1974. He played a minor role in the drama by conveying a telephone message to Baryshnikov from friends in New York, and he obtained the first interview with the dancer following his defection.

Fraser claims in his Prologue to have "removed myself almost entirely from the text . . . because it is appropriate and less irritating to the reader." This is the first of many inaccuracies to be encountered within these pages. He may not employ the first-person pronoun, but he makes his irritating

1 *Private View: Inside Baryshnikov's American Ballet Theatre*, by John Fraser, with photographs by Eve Arnold; Bantam Books, 288 pages, $35.

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presence felt throughout the text by his frequent lapses into tastelessness, nastiness, and arrogance. He is also guilty of crimes against the English language. If Fraser owns a dictionary he did not consult it when he wrote that Clara in *Nutcracker* is a "noxious tot," a certain dancer was the cause of "sometimes nearly inchoate concern," and Baryshnikov seemed "nominally more at ease working with the men than with the women."

Fraser has a knack for the unseemly image: "If it were not for dreams, there would not be such a thing as ballet . . . and mothers would smash their daughters' kneecaps before they had managed even a modest demi-plié"; "There were ballerinas in [Nora Kaye's] day who would have broken a leg or two to be born with a Russian surname." (Interesting that the mayhem is always directed against women.) Baryshnikov's newborn daughter is a "tiny lump of humanity," while assistant artistic director Charles France is a "great, bounding slab of humanity."

In Fraser's own description, he was "a young provincial dance critic" fifteen years ago when he first encountered Baryshnikov—the implication being that now he is a sophisticated, cosmopolitan one. Yet his statements often bespeak a limited viewing experience and the prejudices of those with only a little learning. The National Ballet School in Toronto, he asserts, is "widely regarded as one of the top five or six ballet academies in the world." Leningrad, Moscow, London, Paris, Copenhagen, and the New York City Ballet-affiliated School of American Ballet make six: which two would Fraser eliminate to make room for Toronto? Or take his listing of choreographers "of rank" with whom Baryshnikov has worked: Tudor, Balanchine, Robbins, Tharp—no argument there. But Petit, Butler, Neumeier?

Nowhere is Fraser's provincialism more pronounced than in his attitude toward Balanchine and New York City Ballet. Here is a living, breathing specimen of that endangered species, genus Kirkland, who truly believes that Balanchine's work is cold and unemotional. It is Jerome Robbins, Fraser asserts, who provides City Ballet with the "crucial emotional counterpart missing in the master's own repertoire." Fraser writes: "Baryshnikov's heated, exuberant style—however much he tried to tone it down—was always vying with Balanchine's cool intentions. His efforts to humanize the title role in *Apollo*, for example, were not appreciated, and such words as 'impetuosity' and 'self-indulgent' started appearing in the lexicon of criticism about Baryshnikov." Though Fraser is correct in pointing out that Baryshnikov never entirely succeeded in mastering Balanchine's style—the most recent evidence could be seen last month in the PBS Dance in America broadcast of "Baryshnikov Dances Balanchine"—it remains unclear why a god ought to be humanized in the first place and doubtful that a dancer of Baryshnikov's intelligence would direct his efforts toward this questionable goal.

Fraser also accuses Balanchine of egotism: "The acerbic choreographer downgraded the whole idea of superstars (except, it was archly pointed out, for himself) and expected all his dancers to play supporting roles to the choreography." Though Fraser attributes this sentiment to Baryshnikov "admirers" who were "aghast" when he left A.B.T. to join City Ballet, it is clear that he counts himself among those aghast admirers. He acknowledges Balanchine's "genius" and allows that Baryshnikov's work with him was "very important" to the dancer, but the results Fraser sees only as destructive and pernicious: permanent physical injury and a "dramatic stage presence [that] was altered and, for some, diminished."[2]

In his interpretation of Lincoln Kirstein's eightieth-birthday celebration at the New

2 From a profile of Baryshnikov in the January 1989 *Connoisseur*: "Whatever critics may say, he insists to this day, 'for my brains, the Balanchine years were the most satisfying years of my dancing in the United States . . . .' He is amazed that 'no one was smart enough to understand such a simple thing.'"

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York State Theatre, which Fraser uses as a pregnant close to his narrative, he becomes downright bizarre. Peter Martins—whom Fraser identifies only as "the amiable Danish dancer saddled with the unenviable challenge of succeeding Balanchine," thereby ignoring a decade of choreography—entered the stage. "The whole affair came gloriously unstuck," Fraser contends, when Martins announced that the company's present to Kirstein was a production of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

"A buzz went around the hall," he writes. "*The Sleeping Beauty* was not the kind of production loyal City Ballet fans expected to see from their company. This was the sort of overblown stuff Ballet Theatre did all the time." Fraser's interpretation of the buzz seems unlikely, to say the least. Not only had Balanchine already produced versions of both of Tchaikovsky's other ballets, but, as Fraser quotes Martins as saying, the choreographer had for years wanted to mount the third, hesitating only because he wanted it to be carried out on the scale of the original Maryinsky production with which he had grown up.

There followed a performance of Robbins's *Circus Polka*, with Baryshnikov in the nondancing role of the Ringmaster. Then Martins, Kirstein, and Baryshnikov appeared onstage to acknowledge the applause. "Kirstein beamed," Fraser writes.

> After a few moments he turned slightly to his right and moved toward the two men. Peter Martins, the official host of the celebration, seemed vaguely perplexed as to what to do next, but not Kirstein. Still beaming, he moved closer to Mikhail Baryshnikov and put his arm around his shoulder. It was clearly a spontaneous and natural instinct, heightened by the euphoria of the occasion. It was also an exceedingly provocative sight. Side by side, there was Lincoln Kirstein and the latest Mr. B. . . .

The ellipses—marking the end of the book's final chapter, "Lord of the Dance"—are the author's, inviting the reader to draw the obvious conclusion: the anointing by Kirstein of Baryshnikov as Balanchine's artistic heir. (The contestants on "Jeopardy!" had similar difficulty distinguishing between the two Russians whose names both begin with "B"; but, then, they didn't presume to write books about it.) The fact that Balanchine's contribution to the art of ballet was as a pedagogue and a choreographer, and Baryshnikov's as a dancer, seems of no consequence to Fraser.

On questions of lesser import, too, Fraser seems to regard facts as stupid things. (In his Prologue he complained of "the always tedious restrictions of reality" when he was writing his interview with the just-defected Baryshnikov.) Chronology presents a particular stumbling block. When Fraser writes that "before Diaghilev's Ballet Russes [*sic*] and his wonder boy, Nijinsky, dazzled Paris early in our own century, the chief role of a man onstage was as a mere *porteur*," one would think him unacquainted with the two and a half centuries of ballet history that preceded the Romantic era, and male superstars such as Louis XIV and Auguste Vestris. Yet later he refers to the sixteenth-century ballet de cour. Unfortunately, he attributes to this era toe dancing ("The ballet toe shoe is one of the few instruments of torture from Catherine de Medici's days to survive intact into our own time"), a product of the nineteenth-century Romantic ballet.

He has problems even with the history of his own era. Writing of Baryshnikov's 1970 London visit, his first time in the West, Fraser states that "very shortly thereafter, the most adventurous dance critics—notably Arlene Croce in *The New Yorker* and Clement Crisp in *The Financial Times*—began speculating in print about the impact such an innovative technical genius could have on choreography itself." Croce may indeed have so speculated, but the name of Baryshnikov does not appear in her writings (which, incidentally, are conveniently collected in book form and, unlike the present volume, indexed) until the fateful

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Canadian adventure four years later. Similarly, recounting the career of Susan Jaffe, Fraser writes that she joined the A.B.T. junior company in 1978 and Baryshnikov "immediately noticed her" and "gave her his vote of approval: lose weight, work hard and he would take her into the senior company in the fall." Jaffe might starve herself till she was but a wraith, and Baryshnikov still would not have had the authority to hire her for A.B.T., since at the time of his alleged vote he was a dancer at New York City Ballet. Elsewhere, Fraser appears to believe that Fred Astaire was "identified with" the old Ballet Theatre.

What blunders like these reveal is that Fraser is more interested in dramatizing an issue in which he strongly believes than in accurately conveying information. The facts cited above are all verifiable in public documents. But what of the information gained by the author's privileged "private view"—the point of this book—which must be taken on faith?

If Fraser sometimes allows his fervor to get the better of his journalistic standards, he loses any semblance of objectivity on the subject of his erstwhile colleagues, the dance critics. The female critics in New York are characterized as witches; a male reviewer in that city "amused himself" by making false charges of choreographic plagiarism; a critic in Los Angeles is Baryshnikov's "perpetual nemesis." When Baryshnikov mounted *The Sleeping Beauty*, Fraser writes, he "was under no illusions [*sic*] that he would receive many thanks for this effort [from] the critics, who often use a new production of a major classic to strut their own stuff at the expense of all the labor and effort needed to mount such a ballet." The only critic for whom Fraser expresses admiration is Arlene Croce, but only when it suits his purpose. It does not do so on the subject of *The Sleeping Beauty*, so hers becomes the only major critical voice missing from his rogues' gallery.

Yet though Fraser has contempt for most critics, nothing he quotes from them comes close in viciousness to his own review of the Bolshoi ballerina Raissa Struchkova: "Heaven and her husband alone knew what she tipped the scales at. The sight of her later that evening in full battle dress—spiked tutu, fingers like stilettos set menacingly at the end of her pudding-dough arms and hands, garish smile pasted on her face, her legs surely fashioned from the sturdiest heart of oak—was more than enough to make the strongest men tremble. Literally." This instance of misogyny, by the way, is not unique. In his diatribe against the critics' reactions to *The Sleeping Beauty*, Fraser names one respected female reviewer and identifies her as "another senior member of the New York coven of dance critics." Rushing to deliver the message to Baryshnikov in Toronto, Fraser describes himself running "faster even than Nureyev fleeing a female admirer."[3]

In at least one instance Fraser combines gratuitous nastiness with questionable journalistic ethics. A young corps boy admonished by an older dancer for lying on the floor in his elaborate *Sleeping Beauty* costume is identified by name, and his response recorded for posterity: "I don't give one fuck about this costume and I don't give one fuck about this fucking production." Fraser could have made his point—that "many of the younger dancers . . . found the classics a tedious and empty exercise"—just as well without naming names.

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3 It is not only females that rile Fraser. Defending Baryshnikov's reworking of *Nutcracker*, Fraser claims it was hailed as "refreshingly heterosexual." (As opposed to all those homosexual versions?) The Argentine dancer Julio Bocca "has been singularly successful in resisting any effort to speak or understand English." Explaining that each person on the A.B.T. board of trustees is expected to come up with $100,000 a year for the company, he writes of one former member: "Ivan Boesky, before his precipitous [*sic*] departure, discovered a rather clever way to make a major commitment and hold on to his pennies. The Great Arbitrageur promised to underwrite the cost of a specially commissioned ballet focusing on the Holocaust. It is not clear whether this breakthrough of an idea was ever taken seriously . . . ."

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If *Private View* does not provide much insight into the crowned head of American Ballet Theatre, it reveals a good deal about the powers behind the throne. The most influential—and controversial—of these is Charles France, whose modest title of assistant to the artistic director belies the extent of his real influence. In the subject's own words, he comes across as articulate, thoughtful, sensitive, dedicated. To Fraser, the resentment France arouses is both unfair and inevitable, an ineluctable concomitant of his position: "France, like all Number Twos, inadvertently gives the impression that he runs the company, because he has to do so much of the master's bidding, especially the dirty work." Even France's histrionic behavior and outbursts of rage against those whom he perceives to be thwarting him are presented in a way that makes them appear, if not justified, colorful rather than cruel and destructive. As for Baryshnikov, he states simply, "I would not be where I am today without Charles. Period. No more debate."

Nevertheless, gossip and speculation continue on the part of the dancers, the public, and the dreaded press. When France reads an article in *The New York Times* or *Dance Magazine* that he believes gives a "one-sided" view of the company, we are told, he becomes enraged: "It is always very difficult for me to not feel enormous frustration when people outside the company make any sort of evaluation without all the relevant information." Often, he explains, what appears in print is the result of a press person accepting without question the account of a disaffected dancer, without considering that "maybe, on the other side, there have been some terribly difficult decisions that had to be taken" and "maybe that decision caused as much grief, or more, to the artistic staff." France cares what those in the company think about him, he says, "wherever there is a dangerous gap between that thinking and reality."

Here, then, is France's opportunity to present his version of that reality to the public, especially as regards his own position in the company, and he does so at length. In fact, he is directly quoted more than any other individual in the book, whose very raison d'etre may well be this apologia pro vita mea. Being intelligent and articulate, he acquits himself well, if not entirely convincingly.

The American Ballet Theatre depicted in Fraser's *Private View* is an embattled and deeply divided institution, a congeries of factions—artistic staff, board of trustees, executive director, director of development, dancers—whose goals seem more often to conflict than to coincide. There is especially no love lost between the artistic staff and the director of development, Larry Lynn, who, in Fraser's words, "will salivate for Merrill Lynch and the Movado Watch Corporation if they will underwrite part of a national tour." For his part, Lynn admits that it is "damn difficult" to get Baryshnikov to do anything for them, even though "two minutes of his presence anywhere will do more good than a whole year of glad-handing by any other artistic director in the country."

Baryshnikov deals with the situation by refusing to accept any financial compensation for his services as artistic director. Thus, according to Fraser, he "appears to have won the right to tell his hierarchy to get stuffed if he doesn't want to do something," including dancing during the season. Baryshnikov especially resents efforts to exploit his superstar status, which he considers "peripheral" to his job as artistic director and "his own business, literally and figuratively"—an attitude that seems somewhat disingenuous, as he surely knows that his celebrity was a significant selling point in his selection for the job.

Baryshnikov's personal distaste for the exploitation of his star quality helps to explain the direction in which he has chosen to take his company. The season chronicled in this book, according to Fraser, would be the one in which Baryshnikov "was going to prove the worth of creating an ensemble of young dancers who would so dazzle audiences they would forget they ever lusted

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after his or any other superstar's body onstage."[4] His goal is an A.B.T. "recognized for the brilliance and distinctiveness of its style." Yet to this viewer, "dazzling," "brilliant," and "distinctive" are about the least apt words one could use to describe A.B.T. style under Baryshnikov. Correct and dutiful it is, and often dull, stiff, and unmusical. The mystery is why Baryshnikov wants his company to dance in a way that is so far removed from everything he embodied as a performer.

In the chapter entitled "True Heirs," Fraser writes that Baryshnikov sought "a clear, eloquent, and, above all, coherent style which acknowledged the supremacy of a technical tradition he understood to be the best." We may safely assume this tradition to be that of the Kirov, in which Baryshnikov was formed. At the end of the book, he makes a telling comment to a former fellow student from Leningrad on their way to Glassboro, New Jersey, to observe a performance by a small touring troupe from the Kirov: "Well, at least with these dancers we will see consistent style and good schooling."

While good schooling is essential to the classical dancer, it is the concern of the student rather than the mature performing artist, who should be concentrating on those elusive qualities that are—to appropriate the title of a book by Erik Bruhn—beyond technique. No wonder the dancers at A.B.T. so often look as if Teacher were standing in the wings with a ruler, ready to rap their knuckles if a finger is out of place.[5] Baryshnikov's almost obsessive concern with correctness in his own dancing served only to allow his genius to shine through that much more brightly. With ordinary mortals, it results in academicism.

Considering Baryshnikov's extreme reluctance to reveal himself, and his belief that the press "never really print what you tried to say anyway," it's difficult to imagine why he agreed to allow a journalist to hang around underfoot for a year. In the Prologue, the author writes of the "daunting" degree of trust this openness implied on the part of Baryshnikov. "In some ways I have repaid him with what might be considered too much scrutiny and analysis," Fraser writes; and for once he is right. In his effort to celebrate Baryshnikov and his accomplishments, Fraser may inadvertently have embarrassed him.

Private View never attacks head-on the questions of greatest interest and concern to those who care about the state of ballet in America today: Does the current state of dancing at A.B.T. represent what Baryshnikov wants? If so, why? What the book does do is give a behind-the-scenes look at the mechanics and politics of running a major touring dance company, and provide further grist for the ever-churning ballet gossip mill.

4 Contradictorily, Fraser later writes that "during the 1986-87 season . . . it had been decreed from on high that Susan Jaffe would begin her emergence as a superstar . . . . The company had decided to build much of the Met season around Jaffe, to launch her into orbit of stardom [*sic*]."

5 The simile of infantilization is employed in a description of offstage life at A.B.T. by a corps member who had danced with the Royal Ballet: "At the Royal, the dancers are treated as ladies and gentlemen . . . . Here the dancers are treated like children."

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Books

The doleful legacy of Carlton Beals

by Mark Falcoff

Prior to World War II, the role of the United States in world affairs was largely limited to Mexico, the Philippines, and the nations of the Caribbean Basin (Cuba, Haiti, and the Central American republics). Then, as now, Americans were not much interested in those places; most, in fact, were probably only vaguely aware of the influence that the United States exercised over them. The term "Third World" had not yet come into existence, replete with its heavy cultural and moral overtones, and apart from Protestant missionary organizations and a small number of American corporations, there were no domestic constituencies for "Latin American" or "Philippine" policy. Occasionally some sensational event—a civil war, a revolution—would push these countries briefly onto the front pages of American newspapers, but most of the time they received coverage only in the "little" magazines—particularly *The Nation* and *The New Republic*.

The situation prior to World War II sharply contrasts with that of the present day in other ways as well. Unlike today, in the interwar period few American journalists were college graduates; fewer still spoke foreign languages; and almost none could be described as politically or culturally left of center. On the other hand, those who wrote for the little magazines tended to be all three. In that sense, they were precursors of today's journalist-activist or journalist-as-participant, and their role in shaping elite opinion and even American policy, particularly in the late 1930s, was far from negligent. One such was Carlton Beals, who covered every major Latin American story from the Mexican Revolution in the 1920s to the Cuban revolution in the 1960s, and who is now the subject of a full-dress academic biography by John A. Britton.[1]

Though Beals himself does not emerge in these pages as a particularly interesting or sympathetic personality, his career does allow his biographer to explore a wide range of important subjects—most of them related to the "international" aspect of American cultural and political radicalism in the 1920s and 1930s. There are cameo appearances from many key figures of the period—Mike Gold, Ernest Gruening, Bertram Wolfe, Frank Tannenbaum, Waldo Frank, Joseph Freeman, Freda Kirchwey, as well as such foreign personalities as Diego Rivera, Alexandra Kollontai, Julio Antonio Mella, Fernando Ortiz, Rabindraneth Roy, and David Alfaro Siqueros. The book lacks a certain intellectual weight and sureness of touch, and suffers from too close an identification with its subject; nonetheless, it brings to bear an impressive amount of research, not only from Beals's personal papers but from American and Mexican

1 *Carlton Beals: A Radical Journalist in Latin America*, by John A. Britton; University of New Mexico Press, 322 pages, $24.95.

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archives. On more than one count, it adds significantly to our understanding of the history of both countries, and above all to the wider phenomenon of "Third Worldism" past and present. The ghost of Beals stalks much of the news coverage that Americans have received about many countries over the past eight years, most notably El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Carlton Beals was born in Kansas in 1893, the first son of a lawyer-newspaperman and an English teacher, both of whom subscribed to the more radical version of American populism. Beals's father was something of a failure in both of his chosen professions; his prospects did not improve in California, where he resettled his family in 1900. But Carlton seems to have absorbed most of his father's basic values, above all his sense of moral superiority and his rejection of conventional American values. Upon his graduation from Berkeley in 1918 he fled to Mexico to avoid military service in the United States. He remained there more or less continuously for many years thereafter (with a brief interlude in Italy in 1922), learning the language and serving in various capacities—as an English instructor to the staff of revolutionary chieftain Venustiano Carranza, as a teacher at the American School in Mexico City, and then, for almost a decade, as a correspondent for *The New Republic*.

During the 1930s, Beals expanded his interests to Cuba and Peru, to each of which he devoted full-length books. His obsessive and wrongheaded campaign of character assassination against U.S. Ambassador Harry Guggenheim in Havana—even his admiring biographer comes close to calling it that—played an important role in preparing the way for the Cuban revolution of 1933. Concretely, by representing U.S. policy as being more favorable to dictator Gerardo Machado than in fact it was, Beals helped to undermine the ambassador's attempts to ease Machado out quietly, in the process polarizing the conflict among Cubans. Beals was also the first American journalist to interview Nicaraguan General Augusto Sandino, who had become a Latin American legend through his leadership of a guerrilla campaign against a small expeditionary force of U.S. Marines. In 1937 he participated briefly in the efforts of Leon Trotsky (by then an exile in Mexico) to clear his name against Stalin's accusations at the Moscow Trials, and by the early 1940s he had become a frequent contributor to mainstream American magazines. In the late 1940s and 1950s, however, the American national mood was distinctly uncongenial to radicalism or people who wrote about it; Beals thus holed up on a farm in Connecticut owned by his fourth wife, writing on a wide range of non-political topics for minor magazines and book publishers. He returned to public view briefly in the early 1960s to write for the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina, as well as to produce one last major book, *Latin America: World in Revolution* (1967). He died in 1979.

Britton reports that one of Beals's professors at Berkeley told him that he had "the knack of writing"—to which he added, "Don't let your pen be idle." The gentleman had greatly overstated the case, though his advice was sound. Beals was blessed less with talent than with sheer industry—over the years he wrote thirty-four books and more than two hundred magazine articles. At its best, as in *Banana Gold* (1932), his work resembled that of the more talented travel writers of the day. Most of the time, however, his prose was deeply purple—tasteless, hyperbolic, undignified. His *Porfirio Díaz, Dictator of Mexico* (1932), for example, is pockmarked by expressions like "corral and kosher" or "know his onions." When one American academic expert on Peru took issue with his book *Fire on the Andes* (1934), he accused the man of being "a rancid Bourbon, a kisser of the toes of aristocracy, a sacred institution chest-pounder." As he grew older his style simply became more acerbic, as he substituted vituperation for argument; *Latin America: World in Revolution* seems to have been

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written with his liver. Presumably he owed his pre-eminence to the fact that then, as now, journalists were notoriously shiftless, and the few who—like Beals—were not became disproportionately influential.

Between 1910 and 1930 Mexico was torn by a series of civil wars which subsequent historians call the Revolution. At one level, the conflict was about issues which had been smoldering since the late colonial period—land tenancy, the prerogatives of the Roman Catholic church, and racial distinctions. At another, it turned on relations between Mexico and the United States, which had become in the late nineteenth century the country's largest source of foreign capital and investment. And finally, it represented a struggle for power among leaders of an ascendant class of revolutionary generals, most of whom subsequently became businessmen-politicians and eventually founded a new order not significantly different from the one the Revolution replaced.

During the 1920s Mexico was a favored place of pilgrimage for American radicals, largely because (to them) its regime represented the antithesis of Coolidge prosperity and what Beals called "the American herd gospel: success, college friends, conventional engagement . . . a job in the shipping office." According to Britton, Beals was particularly attracted to "the humble lifestyle of the Indian and mestizo peasants, convinced that they were morally superior to the middle-class, materialistic money grubbers of the United States." At no point in the book, it should be mentioned, does Britton question whether this characterization is adequate to the period; indeed, he repeats the notion periodically as if it is above all scholarly discussion.

Actually, the romantic phase of the Revolution ended early, as did its quarrel with the United States, with whom a treaty settling outstanding claims for expropriation was signed in 1923. By the mid-1920s, General Plutarco Elías Calles had become a virtual dictator, assisted by thuggish labor and peasant leaders whose principal task was to suppress all of the rebellious tendencies out of which they themselves had emerged. As Britton points out, Beals was somewhat late in recognizing this.

During the 1920s, in fact, Beals was something of an unpaid press agent for the Mexican government, which carefully monitored his articles in *The New Republic* and hastened to massage his ego when he seemed to be veering from the official line. In most cases, however, Beals needed no disciplining. When José Vasconcelos, former minister of education, challenged Calles's stand-in for the presidency in 1929, in an election marked by fraud and violence, Beals assured the readers of *The New Republic* that the defeated candidate had no support; when Vasconcelos's followers questioned the veracity of his reports, Beals conceded that they might have a point, but that "the matter is not worth going into now."

Likewise, when he visited war-torn Jalisco in 1927, he discovered that the Catholic guerrilla movement there was largely a response to government provocations, but he hesitated to publish his findings—for fear, he confided to friends, of giving aid and comfort to advocates of U.S. military intervention! By the end of the decade, when his disillusionment with Calles was complete, instead of setting the record straight and admitting his errors, he moved on to Cuba, where he could offer uncritical support for a revolutionary cause which had not yet triumphed.

Britton puts at the center of Beals's attraction to Mexico his "anti-imperialism," not merely his opposition to U.S. military intervention in the affairs of other, weaker peoples but his opposition to U.S. economic influence through investment and the export of technology. "His qualified advocacy of modernization by revolution and his unqualified condemnation of imperialism," he writes, helped to establish "the basis for a new framework of understanding and explaining the complex

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process of change that was underway not only in Mexico but elsewhere in Latin America, Africa, and Asia." He even credits Beals's views with being a kind of primitive precursor of what is known today as "dependency theory," a shorthand term for the notion that some countries are poor because others are rich, and that all foreign influences in pre-industrial countries necessarily lead to poverty, not progress.

In some ways this characterization of Beals is apt, to the extent that dependency theory seeks to have it both ways. That is, it tends to idealize primitive cultures in isolation at the same time that it purports to favor the *fruits* of modernization (health, literacy, rising living standards), using the quasi-religious concept of "revolution" to avoid explaining how to get from one state to the other. Thus, almost alone of American radicals, Beals opposed not merely the "Dollar Diplomacy" of various Republican administrations but Franklin Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy," the centerpiece of which was a series of reciprocal trade agreements which opened U.S. markets to Latin American exports.

For Beals, this policy was a device for siphoning off valuable raw materials and currency from Latin America, as if the act of entering into ordinary commercial transactions amounted to a looting of the southern nations. He never explained where he expected these countries to get the resources to improve the lot of their peoples if they could not sell their products abroad. All he knew was that U.S. influence was bad, in whatever form it took. In fact, in his view, Roosevelt's abandonment of military intervention was actually the more insidious, since it paved the way for "the subtle, but even more debilitating policies of economic exploitation." "Like most economic nationalists in Latin America," Britton writes approvingly, "Beals saw government action, not private initiative, as the most practical means to guide national economic development." That *Latin American* nationalists might reason thus is one thing; why Beals—a foreigner—felt obli-

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gated to subscribe uncritically to their views is quite another. Moreover, that his biographer could write as if Beals's ideas have never been tried—whereas, in fact, for more than fifty years they have been the conventional wisdom in Latin America and now stand revealed as the first cause of its widespread economic and social decay—speaks volumes about the ideological blindness which afflicts important sectors of the American academy, particularly that which specializes in "Third World" studies.

Throughout Britton's book there are frequent references to Communism and Communists, as well as to efforts by American government agencies to link Beals to the Soviet Union. The author was able to obtain Beals's file from the FBI under the Freedom of Information Act and quotes from it profusely; like most documents of this kind, it makes for piquant reading. Beals moved in radical circles in Mexico and the United States, and obviously knew many people on the Left in both countries, including Communists. The fact is, however, that he was never a Communist, or for that matter even attracted to Communism, particularly in its Soviet incarnation. He quarreled with Michael Borodin, the Comintern's representative in Mexico in the early 1920s, as he did with assorted other Russian agents or their sympathizers. It would appear, actually, that he quarreled with almost everybody.

Beals's stance as an independent radical recommended him to Max Schachtman, leader of the American Socialist Workers Party, who invited him to him to participate in the Dewey Commission, convoked in Mexico City in 1937 at the request of Leon Trotsky. The commission, it will be recalled, was a response to the show trials staged by Stalin in Moscow the year before whose purpose was to "prove" that his defeated rival in the struggle for power had all along been secretly in the pay of the German Kaiser, Imperial Japan, and the British Empire. (It is perhaps worth noting that contemporary liberal and Leftist opinion appeared to require such extraordinary responses in order to vindicate Trotsky's revolutionary honor.)

Beals arrived late from the United States and in a bad humor; took umbrage at the fact that several crucial sessions had been held without him; and exacted revenge by acting as the devil's advocate in the proceedings. He eventually resigned in a huff, refused to sign the commission's final report, and in fact took up the cudgel against it in the American liberal press. This chapter shows Beals's biographer at his worst: Britton makes a lame and unconvincing case for his subject's role in the matter ("Beals was coldly objective [while] Trotsky apparently saw the hearings as a chance for personal vindication"), but he does at least succeed in convincing us that—contrary to the later allegations of Trotskyists in the United States—Beals harbored no Stalinist sympathies. Evidently, his vanity and outsized sense of self-importance were far larger than any particular political commitment.

During the late 1950s friends advised Beals that a new revolution was brewing in Cuba, which led him to revisit the island for the first time in many years. He did not meet Castro on this occasion, but what he learned did not impress him favorably. Ironically, for once his tendency to shoot from the hip led to a bull's eye: he described the incipient Cuban dictator as a "quick-tempered, impatient, imperious, violence-prone adventurer, whose father built a landed empire on theft and corruption, and left his son the legacy of a youth shattered by his father's vaunted infidelity." Once the revolution triumphed, however, Beals cast caution to the winds and became a member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, a group of American pro-Castro apologists. Revisiting the island in 1960, he was reminded of Mexico in the 1920s; "I feel much younger," he wrote. "I feel rejuvenated. It seems that everything around me is filled with youthful energy." Britton adds, "His writing . . . was full of an ebullience

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that, at times, bordered on naïveté. He failed to detect, or perhaps refused to allow himself to see, that Castro was headed ever closer to Russia."

Shortly after seizing power Castro took up an old suggestion which Beals had made long ago—that the Latin Americans should have their own news organization, interpreting world events from their own point of view. Thus was born Prensa Latina, for whom he became an occasional writer. The agency sent him on a lecture tour of Mexico and South America, with the understanding that it would distribute his travelogues and commentaries. Midway in the journey, however, director Fermín Revueltas was replaced by Jorge Massetti, an Argentine Marxist friend of Ché Guevara, and Beals found his articles subject to censorship and heavy rewriting. He wrote privately to a friend that Prensa Latina had become "Communist lock stock and barrel, and has degenerated into a combination censorship bureau [for Cubans] and a propaganda bureau abroad." In the same letter, he warned that if the Cuban Communists did not moderate their actions, "the whole revolution is going to be wrecked." He quietly terminated his relationship with the news agency, but never criticized Castro openly.

"Beals was a secular prophet who challenged middle class comfort and conformity with the disturbing reminder that most of the people in the Western hemisphere did not fit into the bourgeois mold. His singular advocacy of the legitimacy of revolution and the illegitimacy of imperialism constituted a personal campaign against the expansionist, business-oriented, materialistic and individualistic society that he rejected." Thus Britton's epitaph for his hero. Certainly it is the way that Beals himself would have wished to be remembered.

Without doubt, Beals rejected American society as he found it, but his radicalism sought a larger theater for its fullest expression. For him, anti-Americanism was a kind of organizing philosophical principle, against which all other institutions, nations, and movements were judged. This explains why he was attracted to Latin America in the first place, since it was the one region of the colonial or semi-colonial world during the interwar period where hatred of the United States (as opposed to Britain, France, or Holland) was something of a fixation by intellectuals and politicians. It also helps to account for his love affair with the Mexican Revolution, which waxed and waned not according to its own peculiar rhythms but according to the way it was perceived as an anti-paradigm to the American way of life. Once Calles made his peace with Washington, his government lost its appeal for Beals, who simply moved on to Peru, and then Cuba, always in quest, as one critic wrote, "of the tumult and chaos his soul loves." Thus, Beals's interest in Castro was tepid during the latter's "moderate" (pre-1959) political phase, and reached fever pitch only when the Cuban dictator sought and obtained a direct confrontation with the United States.

Beals's career established the basic parameters of "engaged" or "committed" journalism as it would subsequently emerge in the 1960s—a commitment not to Marxist ideology but to a vague notion of undifferentiated "revolutionism"; the snobbish manipulation of claims to expertise in exotic cultures; a contempt for the purported "materialism" of Western societies without offering an alternative to the poor of the pre-industrial world; a rigid, reflexive anti-Americanism; the creation of false dichotomies—particularly between economic development and political independence; above all, the notion that a symbiotic relationship exists between the United States and less developed countries, in which the interests of one cannot be advanced without detriment to the interests of the other.

Above all, it prefigures the way in which journalism has come to shape so much of our perceptions of the world, and, by indirection, the views which our own elites

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hold about our country and our culture. Beals's biographer is right to make strong claims for his subject's importance; his doleful legacy continues to be felt wherever American society finds itself in conflict with others who choose to side with our enemies, regardless of the cost to us, to them, or to their own, long-suffering peoples.

Between decorum and abandon

Jonathan Galassi Morning Run. Paris Review Editions/British American Publishing, 65 pages, $7.95

Frederick Morgan Poems: New and Selected. University of Illinois Press, 258 pages, $12.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

Jonathan Galassi's last two books were translations of Montale: *Otherwise: Last and First Poems of Eugenio Montale* (1984) and *The Second Life of Art: Selected Essays of Eugenio Montale* (1982). Yet Galassi's poetry bears little resemblance to that of the great Italian modernist poet. There are similarities of phrasing and diction, even some conscious echoes: in Galassi's "Against Earrings," for example, the lines, "Don't tonight, don't wear/perfume or put up your hair . . . . Don't you know I'd know your face,/its ivory veiled by your hair," are obviously adapted from Montale's "The Strands of Hair," which begins, "Don't push back the strands of hair which veil/ Your child-like forehead." But on the whole, *Morning Run*, especially its first two sections (the book has three), seems to be quite at odds with Montale's aesthetic disposition.

Montale's taste for symbolism and allusion, and for objective correlatives that reflect internal emotional states, made his poetry appear anti-rational to many. (Its detractors labeled it obscure, which it isn't.) Montale's rejection of straight realism came in part from the "total disharmony" the Italian poet felt since childhood "with the reality that surrounded" him, as he put it in one of the essays Galassi has translated. This disharmony was no doubt intensified by the Italian political climate of the Twenties and Thirties, the period when Montale's first poems were published. (Later in life, Montale spoke of a "necessity for realism"; thus, his late poetry is declarative and ironic—quite unlike his early work.) Montale's major poetry, like that of T. S. Eliot, to whom he is often compared, was a kind of metaphysical stronghold at a time when political reality was perceived to be encroaching more and more on the individual poetic sensibility. Montale once observed that

> I have never been able to resign myself fully to chronological time; and it is this congenital diffidence that has always kept me at a distance from any form of integral historicism, whether it be materialist or dialectical.

Judging from *Morning Run*, Galassi has difficulty resigning himself to this expressly anti-realistic stance. To begin with, there is nothing resembling Montale's private symbolism in Galassi's limpid poems. What's more, the attitudes expressed in them are, to use Montale's word, overtly materialist. Indeed, despite a reliance on rhyme and meter, the young poet's outlook in the first two sections of the book seems to derive more from William Carlos Williams than from anyone else.

In Galassi's poems, the dangers of the imagination are outlined repeatedly. In "To Zachary," for example, the poet tries to explain to the child he addresses that his idea of the world will often be at odds with its reality. The warning, of course, is aimed at all the poets who, in Galassi's view, dream something better than what is:

> In our city beds we can dream the
> endless
> acres of ice and the flawless drifts,
> not the trouble they mean or bring.

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The world unfortunately isn't
this farm that isn't a farm,
this field where nothing happens
but the wind and the rain.
And you know it, though you're still a child:
you want to be watched when you swim into
deep water;
the flies that circle your father's sweating head
anger or scare you.

"The Lake" has a similar point. In this poem, Galassi writes about how we substitute "the image for the thing that isn't there . . . [and] don't see the water for itself." The only way we can respect the world, the poet states, is to "re-create" its "chaos." Likewise, in "To A Classic Poet," Galassi relates how the "words of a moment . . . fought their way into a life/that doesn't care about you/and has to be made to see,/has to have its nose/rubbed in reality." And in "Our Sky," the poet assures us that "there's no competition" for the "livid, living, through-the-windshield blue" of the sky.

In "Elaine in Edge City" the poet can't understand why "[e]veryone" keeps a wishful "eye on the horizon":

They say the smog has covered up the bay.
If our ship comes in we'll never know,
but would it make a difference anyway?
Everyone keeps an eye on the horizon.
What's there to wait for, what could she
possibly bring?
Last time I counted we had everything.

"Zephyr," the first poem in *Morning Run*, takes issue with Montale's anti-realistic disposition by challenging Eliot's. The poem begins with the advent of spring; and what comes to mind, of course, is *The Waste Land*. Galassi's spring arrives, as he writes, "in its usual difficult careless way,/backing and filling, blowing hot and cold,/mucking things up." Yet despite spring's stubbornness, the poet recommends accepting it:

You could be its zephyr with your cheeks
ruddy and bursting,
aloft and leaning into the change . . .
BE THIS, you seem to be saying, BE
A PART OF THIS, as the naked trees
sway in their willing way and the young sun
still fails to break through the strength of
the clouds
hovering over the parti-colored crowd,
the gusts of not-unfriendly wind transport
you
everywhere, though nowhere we have been.

Where Eliot's April mixed memory and desire—two trap-doors on the stage of time—Galassi's spring helps reaffirm his place *in* time. This is as much an attack on Montale's dissatisfaction with chronological time as it is of Eliot's.

"The Escalator" takes to task a certain exalted concept of art, which is, for Galassi, an escape hatch from reality. A woman the poet sees on a department-store escalator—we take her to be an old lover—is for him an image of the "perfection" of art, the pursuit of which, it's suggested, can escalate into a dangerous obsession:

I turned at the next floor
sensing that if I followed
I might see you again, travelling in the
opposite direction,
still younger, more radiant, more fixed.
I saw ahead an endless stretch of afternoons
wasted while I pursued
your waning, perfecting image on that
escalator forever,
your forehead forever purer, your gaze more
firmly set
while creases and pounds slowly gathered
around me.

To Galassi, art distorts what he elsewhere calls our "flawed but appreciable" life. "[O]ur province is the plain," he affirms in "The Look of Things," a poem addressed to the poet Katha Pollitt, who is portrayed as an advocate of a more imaginative—i.e., "unreal"—and permanent art.

The poems of the second section exhibit the first glimmers of what will be at book's end a reappraisal of Galassi's materialist position. This reconsideration is set in motion

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by a series of love poems which validate real life without the pro-reality polemics that burdened the earlier poems. In these poems Galassi begins to accept *desire*, the tear in the cloth of chronological time.

"Girl on a Bike" is not a love poem, but its unglossed immediacy also makes a more persuasive case for reality than the argumentative, discursive poems of the book's first section:

> *Block Island, R.I.*
>
> Shirt around your waist, your rumpled ducks
> and faded sneakers pumping up and down,
> you meet the challenges the day creates:
> the hills that rise up when you leave the town
>
> and keep on coming while you thread the fields
> decked out in goldenrod and up the lane
> to see the swans that dot the hundred ponds,
> and me behind you under threat of rain.
>
> You make it happen: suddenly the sun
> steps from behind the arras of a cloud.
> You're at the crest and all there is is sea—
> sea and wind that make the silence loud.
>
> And coming down the counterbreeze you
> make
> plays havoc (gently) with your streaking hair.
> The weather smells of heather, salt and effort,
> art is artless and the world is fair.

Galassi's province here *is* the plain, as he put it in "The Look of Things." Yet if this admirably crystal-clear window of a poem holds that "art is artless," á la Williams, the iambic pentameter and subtle narrative movement of "Girl on a Bike" suggest something different. (Just as the use of imagery in "The Escalator" suggests that Galassi's critique of "perfect" images in that poem isn't a hard and fast rule.)

Galassi's growing doubts regarding Williams's "artless" views—and his growing acceptance of the ideas of Montale and Eliot (not to mention Katha Pollitt)— reaches its peak in the book's last pages. Here, Galassi shows a deeper appreciation of history and art and the emotions they evoke. In "King Caesar's Windows," a poem about nineteenth-century shipyards, Galassi pays tribute not just to the continuity between past and present but to what his earlier self would have deplored as falsely eternal: "The brown sea reeds bend,/before the windows as they have bent forever." "Lateness" suggests he no longer distrusts Katha Pollitt's notion of a pristine and permanent art: "lasting is all," Galassi avers, "as you know that lateness is all." Two poems show traces of sympathy toward memory and desire. In "San Francesco," Galassi honors "what the memory of a place can save," and in the book's final poem he admits that "light, heat, scent, color, timelessness: desire" reverberate in him now.

So Galassi has come full circle. Yet the poet of the third section doesn't reject the poet of the first. On the contrary, what Galassi's new perspective reveals is that life and art needn't be antagonistic. In the last couplet of the title poem, he says he's "ready to begin" giving form to experience. The task doesn't only fall to the poet. When Galassi tells the girl on the bike, "[y]ou make it happen," he is addressing everyone who—like himself—remakes reality according to his vision.

Galassi's openness to the world shows him how changeful it is: the world has its seasons. What the sequence of poems in *Morning Run* suggests is that poetry should be commodious enough to contain yesterday's and today's emotions and perceptions—that is, that it should be able to embrace both imagination and reality, life and art, Williams and Montale (or Eliot, or Pollitt). The poem that perhaps strikes this balance best is "Morning Run." Set in Rome, "Morning Run" contrasts the art of the past and the "human dirt" of the present. Few places offer this juxtaposition as well as Rome:

> You gather energy and take the stairs—
> leftover heads and bodies everywhere—
> three at a time to reach the fields the boys
> will pepper later with their games and noise

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and shirts and hair, as lover paired with
lover
will lie down in the grove beyond and hover
between decorum and abandon, spread-
eagled together on the needle bed,
while down the hill the pensioners complain
over their *bocce* in the shady lane.

As the lovers in the poem "hover/between decorum and abandon," so the poet finally does, too.

Hovering between decorum and abandon could serve as a motto for Frederick Morgan's poetry. In Morgan's poetry, however, the opposing poles of form and content are farther apart than in Galassi's. Though both poets use rhyme and meter, Galassi's language is more prosaic than Morgan's, and is thus closer in spirit to Galassi's essentially prosaic view of the world. Morgan's refined language, on the other hand, is used to invoke a subject matter that is often far from graceful. Reading through *Poems: New and Selected*—which contains work chosen from six previous books as well as nineteen new poems—one quickly sees that Morgan favors those aspects of reality that many poets consider too ungainly for poetry. (Particularly those who find the "decorum" of rhyme and meter appealing.) Here is the first of "Two Poems to a Dead Woman":

Lady, the strange malignancy
which you called "love": in two more years
or three, it would have finished me.

You sought chiefly my misery
and pain, took pleasure in my tears.
Lady, you were malignancy

itself, playing your games with me,
tormenting me with guilt and fear,
twisting the love I had in me

to my own shame and injury
until I hated my young years.
This was your strange malignancy—

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loathing yourself, you hated me
who would have freed you from your fears
could I have forced myself to be

the doom you sought so stubbornly!
—But I was rescued by the years
from that perverse malignancy:

they finished you, and set me free.

What inspires Morgan, clearly, is the challenge of casting in a highly formal and polished verse the kind of data that resist it most. "Song," from *A Book of Change* (1972), Morgan's first collection, helps clarify his poetic attitude. In this poem Morgan writes of the way "[t]he devastation/of being/proves being/more fully—"; and how

the harp
of creation
may reverberate
more truly

when the great
final wind
blows strong
through its branches

and the soul
pale and brave
to its first home
advances

The image of "the harp/of creation" refers, it would appear, to Frederick Morgan himself; for as a poet he certainly seems to "reverberate/more truly" when called on to harness highly intractable material through the resources of his art. Death's "devastation"—or, as in the previous poem, a bitter memory—is often the thing most worthy of the poet's considerable powers of grace and artistry.

The "devastation of being" and private bitterness are not the only forms that Morgan's difficult subject matter takes. There is, for example, violence. "From a Forgotten Book" begins:

When we stormed the city Sirk in the mountains
we put to the sword that foul, misshapen people:
cut down men, women, children where they stood.
The corpses choked the streets, dogs drank their blood.

Nevertheless, death seems to be the poet's preferred theme. In "Death Mother," Morgan writes how "death has lived all times in us/and we in her, commingled,/and not to recognize her is/not to recognize ourselves." In "The Step," he observes:

From where you are at any moment you
may step off into death.
Is it not a clinching thought?
I do not mean a stoical bravado
of making the great decision blade in hand
but the awareness, all so simple, that
right in the middle of the day
you may be called to an adjoining room.

And in "The Summit," Morgan notes that "happiness as I knew it was/only a point, quickly passed,/on the common road . . . to/destruction."

A number of poems thunder against humanity. In " 'In a five-minute stillness in September,' " Morgan deplores "[t]he cutting edge of arrogance/that so disfigures our kind." In "The Turtle," the poet says he won't yield "spirit or mind/to hopeful assumptions of man's innocence." And in "The Exiles," he assails whatever deity is responsible for our world of pain:

The world in sum was muck, they thought,
paltry and diseased—
and if indeed a god held sway
he should have worked first on himself,

done something for his private lacks
before presuming to bring forth
other minds touched with his malaise
and dim resentment of the void.

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Another of Morgan's difficult topics is sex. The poet's exotic escapades with "swift Camilla," "Aissa," "Eloise," "that bitch Mathilde," and a Swedish chambermaid may not be to everyone's taste, but they're harmless enough. More unsavory are those poems that border on the pornographic. Even beautiful language and formal metrics can't salvage these.

But it is the autobiographical poems—"Two Poems to a Dead Woman" is one—that offer the greatest resistance to being made poetically attractive. It should be noted that Morgan's first book came out in 1972, when he was fifty. He once remarked in an interview that his divorce from his second wife and the suicide of his son John were critical to his development as a poet. Before these incidents, he said, he was unable to produce anything he liked. While there can be no doubt that such emotionally wrenching episodes did play an important, inciting role in helping Morgan break through as a poet, something else might be noted about this change in his literary outlook: the pivotal events that Morgan describes occurred at a time when "confessional" poetry was dominant—when, that is, everything from the poet's romantic affairs to his laundry lists was deemed the proper focus of poetry. (Poetic form was usually eschewed, however, because the confessors' affairs and laundry lists were perceived to have an organic "form" of their own.) Was it the widespread acceptance of the confessional impulse that gave Morgan the courage to write so directly about his private sorrows? It is possible. Yet few poets associated with the confessional disposition have so consistently escaped the triviality that often resulted from what was for many simply an indulgence in autobiography and private griefs for the sake of a poem.

In "The Past," the ordinary childhood hurt that Morgan describes is made, through his technical and linguistic skill, into something very effective:

> Wind from the frozen lake
> in black New Hampshire night
> froze the tears to my face.

Arikha
Balthus
Braque
Cezanne
Dubuffet
Frankenthaler
Giacometti
Graves
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It was 1936,
deep winter—as I ran
under an aching moon
(quite at the end of my tether)

back to the graceless halls
of that forbidding school
where stunted half-men ruled
our undefended lives.
I spoke to the self within:
"Freeze now and be still—
unyielding as this glass—
then, feel pain no more."

That self obeyed, congealed;
I held it hard within
and thus we two survived.

But I would pay a price
for having a heart turned ice:
years and years must pass
before I loved at last.

This is recalcitrant subject matter; but not as recalcitrant, finally, as that of "February 11, 1977." The loss of the poet's son and the poet's own anguish about the loss are ripe material for self-pity. Once again, Morgan rises splendidly to the occasion:

to my son John

You died nine years ago today.
I see you still sometimes in dreams
in white track-shirt and shorts, running,
against a drop of tropic green.

It seems to be a meadow, lying
open to early morning sun:
no other person is in view,
a quiet forest waits beyond.

Why do you hurry? What's the need?
Poor eager boy, why can't you see
once and for all you've lost this race
though you run for all eternity?

Your youngest brother's passed you by
at last: he's older now than you—
and all our lives have ramified
in meanings which you never knew.

And yet, your eyes still burn with joy,
your body's splendor never fades—
sometimes I seek to follow you
across the greenness, into the shade

of that great forest in whose depths
houses await and lives are lived,
where you haste in gleeful search of me
bearing a message I must have—

but I, before I change, must bide
the "days of my appointed time,"
and so I age from self to self
while you await me, always young.

"February 11, 1977," which is one of the most memorable poems of the Seventies, resembles many of Morgan's best confessional poems in the way that event and emotion are tempered, not only by Morgan's poetic resources but by an awareness of something beyond grief and grief's cause. Morgan's interjection, in the midst of "February, 11, 1977," of his sense of "a quiet forest [that] waits beyond," and of his wish to follow his son "across the greenness, into the shade," show a yearning for release from the world's unhappy grip. In other poems the desire for escape is not the evident death wish it is here. Yet whatever form it takes, this impulse to look "over the edge of the world," as Morgan puts it in the title of another poem, gives his poetry a quality distinctly unlike that of most confessional poetry, which acknowledges only what is seen.

This other-worldly pull is evident throughout Morgan's oeuvre. In "Poem of the Gold Coin," the poet writes of a "space where the mind may seize its vaster being." In "The Vantage," he acknowledges "a larger understanding" that "[d]reams give a sense of." In "Bones," he asserts that "another meaning is coming, wait and see." In "The Christmas Tree," the child stares "at the falling snow/and wonders how he'll ever know." And in the marvelous transla-

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tion of Leconte De Lisle's "In Exelsis," he implores man to "lose [him]self in endless night." What these poems seem to suggest is that Frederick Morgan can't be known completely by an account of his pain, however bracingly comprehensive that account may appear to be.

As in "February 11, 1977," in "'Sometimes I hear . . .'" the poet's absorption in the deaths of his father and son is paradoxically what opens the writer up to a wider view of life's potentialities:

> Sometimes I hear my father's voice, sometimes my son's, in mine:
> the modulations of two who have moved
> beyond these tides of being. Dead and gone,
>
> but still their shapes appear as though in sudden shafts of sun . . .
>
> The world that is not here may be a world of sun and trees,
> a world of man's potentialities:
> our absences may there be presences . . .
>
> . . . Voices of past and future speak in ours
> and somewhere, all is known—as I know now
> father's and son's reality in me.

Frederick Morgan is someone who has been stunned by life's misfortunes. What's remarkable is that, without denying the central place in his verse that these experiences have (and deserve), he refuses to be tied permanently to them. "There always is another way to say it," goes the first line of "Saying"; and the other way to say the agony Morgan has sustained is to transcend it imaginatively and technically. Like Galassi, Morgan believes that coarse, sullied reality is often best expressed in rhyme and meter. Morgan, however, tests the hypothesis even more by bringing to these forms some of the harshest and bleakest facts life can offer. His success, like Galassi's, is a tribute not only to his talent and persistence but to the forms he chooses to work in as well.

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Notebook

Between art and a hard place

by Bradley W. Bloch

Every now and then, one comes across something that is so much a product of the times as to seem a parody of them. A find of this sort occurred a few months ago, when I received in the mail an invitation to subscribe to *Artnews* magazine. The letter began by pointing out, with barely restrained glee, the role which art plays in contemporary life:

> Go to any major art opening these days, and you're likely to rub shoulders with more celebrities than at most Broadway or Hollywood premieres!
>
> Join the auction sale of a new Jasper Johns painting, or a De Kooning, and watch the bidding go up, up and up—past the million dollar mark!
>
> Or simply follow the Saturday crowds to a popular art gallery and feel the electric excitement that fills the air!

Artnews, I was then assured, would serve as my "guide" to this "exciting, expanding, exploding art world."

I did not accept the offer, preferring to make my way through the jungle alone. I was struck, however, not only by the depressing—but no doubt unintended—accuracy with which this letter captured the sad and chaotic state of the art world today, but by the ease with which a much-read arts journal had abandoned even the pretense of responsible criticism. Even more troublesome was the fact that such a move, rather than seeming unusual, or even notable, only mirrors what now constitutes acceptable behavior within much of the arts establishment.

These thoughts came again to mind a short while later, this time when the mail brought a catalogue from the Learning Annex, an adult eduction center dedicated to the very American principle that there is no skill so subtle that it cannot be taught in a lecture or a few short classes. Among the dozens of offerings, which included instruction on how to flirt, how to make sushi, and how to start an import/export business, was a lecture entitled "Art in the 80's and 90's" to be given by Lisa Phillips, the celebrated young curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The catalogue boasted that "if you've got a passion for contemporary art, this is a rare opportunity to listen to an expert speak about upcoming trends, how to spot them before anyone else . . . who's hot and who's not." It seemed strange that a curator could talk about art that had not yet been created, as if museums didn't have enough trouble making sense of that which already exists.

For better or worse, however, Phillips seemed an ideal choice to address these topics. It was Phillips, of course, who was responsible for packaging last year's Julian Schnabel show, and who has been a guiding force behind the last two Whitney Biennials.

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It can also be said that she acts as a spokesperson for the values of the museum in the current age: "I can see things developing six or seven months before most people do," she said in a *New York* profile last May. "You listen and you pay attention to what's going on and what artists are responding to, and that will be the tip-off." The curator as connoisseur has given way to the curator as meteorologist; the goal is no longer to preserve the best but to forecast the next front moving across the map. It is to this end that Tom Armstrong, the Whitney's director, has focused his energies. "She's with-it," he has said of Phillips. "That's a very important part of the operation." But what is the "it" that she is "with"? One suspects it has less to do with aesthetic discrimination than with the pressures of popularity.

And so I gathered with about seventy other people in a Manhattan schoolroom one night last November to hear Phillips speak. She began the evening with a review of American art in the Eighties. The artists included in this slide presentation will come as no surprise to even the most casual of museum-goers. What was revealing, however, was Phillips's accompanying commentary, which illustrated the way in which many of those practicing in the arena of art criticism have traded authority for fashion. One would hope that at its base, criticism would provide a vocabulary that would allow for meaningful distinctions to be drawn between art that is worthy of serious contemplation and that which is not. Today, however, criticism takes even the most marginal and facile of creations and provides them with a verbose shield of respectability. Phillips explained the cartoon paintings of Kenny Scharf as "tending toward figuration," and noted that Keith Haring has "adapted very well to the conditions of the Eighties." These artists were used to illustrate the "East Village Aesthetic," which, she told us, developed in the nightclubs where artists were gathering because museums weren't responding to their work. They must have gathered there quickly, however, for in fact no movement since Pop Art has been embraced so rapidly, or with less thought.

Thus, the paintings of Peter Halley were described as a "blueprint of information transmission," while the flashing signs of Jenny Holzer "relate somehow to messages in advertising." Discussing Jeff Koons's *Two Ball 50-50 Tank*, Phillips explained her enthusiasm for basketballs suspended in water: "I couldn't figure out why anyone would want to do this, but the image was indelible." Whatever these remarks may be, they can hardly be considered a basis for making enduring aesthetic choices.

At this point, Phillips turned her attention to art in the decade to come. I was, naturally, expecting the worst, and my fear was underscored by the fact that a slide of the Starn Twins' *Christ (Stretched)* from the 1987 Biennial now flashed on the screen. Perhaps more than any other artists, the Starn Twins have taken advantage of—and are a product of—the weakness for the trendy which permeates so much of culture today. It was surprising, then, to hear Phillips say that the fierce acceleration of prices and the unrestrained growth of exhibits which have characterized this decade have been "detrimental in some ways." The Starn Twins, she continued, were "victims of the Eighties," and the Whitney was in fact partly to blame for their fate because of its role in facilitating their moment in the spotlight. Nor were they an isolated casualty, as the expectation of rapid fame has "stunted the growth of younger artists."

In Phillips's view, the days of glamour and glitter have run their course. In the years to come, both exhibitions and artworks will decrease in size, and gallery and museum visitors will spend more time with each work they encounter. Artists, meanwhile, will search for enduring modes of expression, in contrast with the current environment, in which "styles change every two years."

That Phillips is inexorably linked to the very conditions which she now derides invites

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one to view her comments as a retraction, if not a conversion. Indeed, it was ironic that a curator of the Whitney Biennial, a sort of art fashion show mounted every two years, should complain that artistic styles change every two years as well. Sadly, this irony seemed lost on Phillips herself; when asked about her new outlook, given her own curatorial history, she could only add that "just because artists wanted to be in the limelight doesn't mean they weren't talented."

However Phillips perceives her contribution to the state in which the art world now finds itself, it must be said that the vision of the future which she presented in her lecture was a laudable one. Unfortunately, obstacles to its fulfillment were almost immediately apparent, obstacles made all the more intractable by Phillips's inability to see them.

In her discussion of current artists, Phillips spoke of the ardor of the Whitney curatorial staff for the "rephotography" of Richard Prince. When they brought Prince's work before the museum's trustees, however, Phillips was shocked to find that they dismissed it as lacking invention, no better than child's play. "That's what they said about Warhol," she then told us, with the weary exasperation of someone who must habitually deal with philistines. But the role of invention in art is hardly one for a curator to brush aside. Phillips's comment reveals the extent to which the primary mandate of the museum—the establishment of aesthetic criteria—has eroded in importance. As a result, curators can only react meekly rather than lead; this is the way that the work of Peter Halley becomes a "blueprint of information transmission."

While there seems to be little thought given by museums to the nature of art, audiences have spent the last decade developing firm notions on the issue. One thing they know about art is that you can buy it: "Watch the bidding go up, up and up—past the million dollar mark!" During an intermission in the lecture, a number of people approached Phillips to ask her advice—on proper investment strategies. This theme continued during the question-and-answer period, in which one person asked Phillips for the name of an affordable painter in the style of Morris Louis, while another wanted recommendations for acquiring art with "a minimalist budget." To her credit, she deflected these queries, but they illustrate how much ground must be travelled before, as Phillips predicts, audiences view art as an object of contemplation.

Another property of art that museum-goers understand is that it provides stylish entertainment. As Phillips went through her slide tour, the audience hunched over notepads, writing down the name of every artist she mentioned. The acoustics in the room were not very good, however, and she was continually interrupted, not to elaborate on some point she had made but rather slowly to repeat the name of the artist being discussed. As the evening progressed, these requests became less and less polite, taking on a frantic edge; for many, the entire experience of understanding art has been reduced to knowing the names of fashionable artists. As American museums, after allowing Abstract Expressionism to be discovered by Europeans, were determined never to let *anything* slip through their fingers again, so museum-goers have learned to dread nothing more than being caught unaware by the latest trend.

Despite these reasons for discouragement, I did observe one hopeful sign that the changes Phillips foretold might in fact come to pass. During the intermission, one perplexed gentleman told me he felt very self-conscious because he was merely listening rather than feverishly taking notes. I assured him that he was probably the only sane person in the room.

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Letters

The young Poussin

To the Editors:
Just so that historians of the future will not be totally confused, let me set the record straight concerning the location of two famous paintings by Nicolas Poussin mentioned in Creighton Gilbert's review of the Fort Worth exhibition ("A Fresh View of Young Poussin," December 1988). The *Death of Germanicus* is, as most everyone knows, in Minneapolis, not in Detroit. The *Diana and Endymion* is not in Boston, but in Detroit. Unfortunately, exhibition catalogues are not the only "breeding grounds of factual errors."

J. Patrice Marandel
Curator, European Paintings
The Detroit Institute of Arts
Detroit, MI

Creighton Gilbert replies:
The correction is just. The walls at Fort Worth were graced with three very similar major Poussins, belonging to Minneapolis, Detroit, and Boston. I erred for the all too common reason that I thought I knew without checking, and so labeled Minneapolis's as Detroit's and Detroit's as Boston's. I would rather not have done it wrong, but still there was a nice compensation, in that the numerous correcting letters (to me as well as to the editors) offered surprising evidence of how widely the piece was actually read, and how closely, even to a two-word parenthesis, and implied that it did not contain any other mistakes. This one at least was "harmless," in the legal use of the word, in that no further statements were based on it.

Mr. Marandel writes "most everyone knows" where the pictures really are, which is indeed the case with respect to specialists. That seems to contradict his stated sole reason for writing in, to keep future "historians" from being "totally confused." They would be unconfused by having looked at the catalogue, my duly cited source. In his last sentence Mr. Marandel points out the truism that errors are not found only in exhibition catalogues, in which I have in other essays noted quite a few, some alas not "harmless." If, as seems possible, the point is that I should hold back on recording them, lest I generate heightened interest in correcting mine, I would say just the opposite, provided the final goal is the general good rather than the status claims of specialists.

Kingsley Amis

To the Editors:
Terry Teachout's discussion of Kingsley Amis (November 1988) is laudable, and it's meet and right for *The New Criterion* to treat of Amis. However, a couple of tiny quibbles: first, Martin Amis's latest novel is not *Einstein's Monsters* but *Success*, an eminently unreadable 1987 British Yuppie novel (hence Teachout can easily be forgiven for overlooking that flatulent little book).

Second, Ego and Id are not dogs in *Lucky Jim*. Rather, if memory serves, Id is the surviving Welch household cat, two others named Ego and

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Super-Ego having died. Dixon encounters Id on entering the Welch house one evening. He admires her because she never lets Professor or Mrs. Welch pick her up. Dixon pets her and whispers to her that she ought to scratch her masters and pee on the carpet. On hearing these suggestions she purrs loudly.

Edward Meadows
New York, NY

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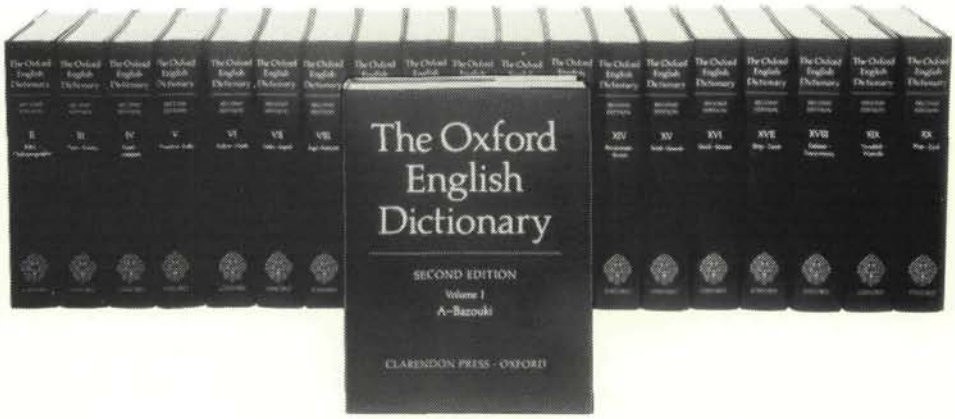

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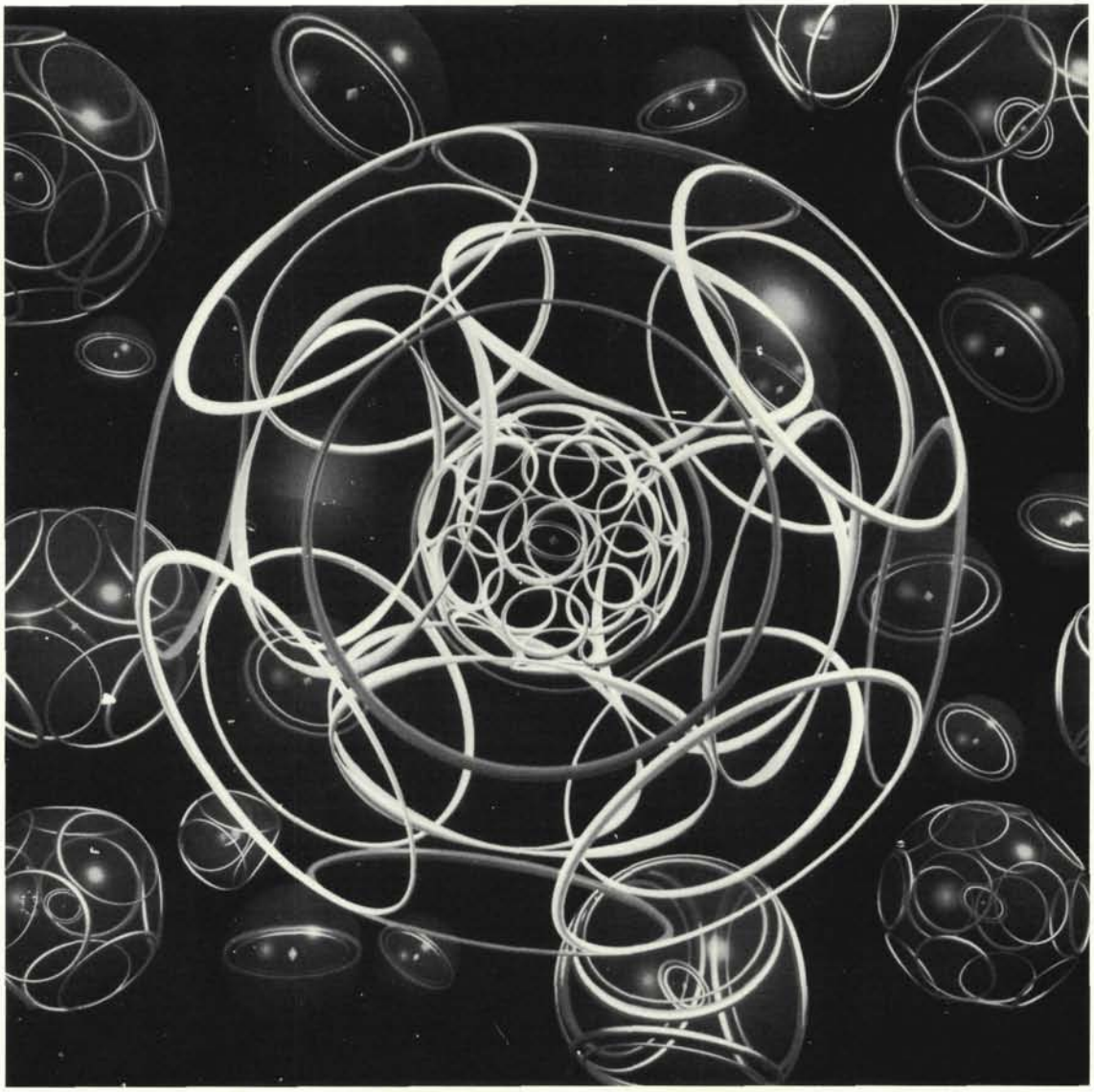

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